

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE UNDERGROUND CELLS





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
UNDERGROUND CELLS**

Jupiter Jones wakes up in a dark, cold, locked cell, and he cannot remember anything about how or why he is there. With him in the cell is a young man who also cannot remember anything. However, Jupiter suspects that the man knows more than he claims. Very soon, Jupiter discovers that Pete Crenshaw is also locked up in another cell, and he has also lost his memory. But where is Bob Andrews? The Three Investigators have to first work separately to get out of this predicament and then solve this highly mysterious case together.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Underground Cells

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Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Spur ins Nichts

(The Three ???: Trail to Nowhere)

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(2005)

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(2021-02-04)

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1. Memory Loss

It was dark. It was cold.

Something hurt... The bones? The head? Something...

Jupiter Jones awoke as slowly as never before in his life. Minute by minute, he dawned towards consciousness, feeling his way up his own body as if it did not belong to him, and laboriously shaking off the blurred dream images.

Dream images... There was a warehouse... A spotlight... A brown island in a white sea... A young man with light blond hair... An important message on a notepad... A hiding place... But with every second, the memory faded more and more. When Jupiter finally opened his eyes, he had all but forgotten the dream.

It was still dark. What time would it be? A glance at the alarm clock...

There was no alarm clock... and no bedside table on which the clock could have stood. There was not even a bed. Jupiter lay on a smooth, hard floor. So that's why everything hurt him, and that was why he was so cold. He straightened up. He couldn't even see his hand in front of his eyes. Where was he?

It took a while, but then this question triggered a sheer adrenaline rush that catapulted Jupiter fully out of sleep. He was not in his room!

Light! He needed light! Jupiter pushed himself up and slowly got to his shaky feet. He felt a cold, tiled wall. Cautiously, Jupiter moved a step forward. Groping along the wall, he ventured forward. There had to be a door here somewhere... or at least a light switch!

Fear gripped Jupiter like an icy hand. Something was going completely wrong here... and he had no idea what. He broke out in a sweat. He needed light!

There! His fingers felt something square. He pressed on it. It flashed. It flashed again. And then, with an electric hum, bright, cold fluorescent light flickered on. It blinded Jupiter so much that he put his hand over his eyes. Cautiously, he dared a second look. Little by little, his eyes got used to the brightness. But what he saw did not reassure him one bit... on the contrary.

This place looked like an abandoned operating theatre. It had no windows and was tiled white up to the ceiling. The tiles were dirty. Dark outlines of things that had once stood or hung here could be seen. Two fluorescent tubes were fixed under the ceiling, and there was a grey steel door on one wall. All in all, this seemed to be an empty cell—empty except for a dark bundle on the floor in the corner.

Dark bundle? Jupiter winced. Someone was lying there! And that someone was just waking up. Jupiter rushed to him. He was a young man in his early twenties with tousled black hair and equally black eyes. He blinked in confusion against the fluorescent light. When he noticed Jupiter, he startled.

"Hello," Jupiter said quickly. "Don't be alarmed. I... er... am quite harmless."

It took a moment for the young man to come to and straighten up. He pressed himself into the corner and assumed a defensive posture. "Who are you?" he asked in a rough voice.

"My name is Jupiter Jones. I just woke up myself and only turned on the light."

The man looked at Jupiter as if he is not quite right in the head. Jupiter could not blame him. He wasn't entirely sure of his own state of mind either.

“We’d better leave this unpleasant place for now,” he suggested, trying to say something constructive.

The man showed no reaction.

Jupiter went to the door and pressed the handle. It was locked. “Well, this... is going less optimally than I had hoped.”

“What kind of weirdo are you?” the stranger asked threateningly.

“I’m not a weirdo. Like I said, my name is Jupiter Jones, and—”

“Did you lock us in here?”

“Locked us in here? No! I... I have no idea who—”

“Where are we?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m warning you, you freak!” the man threatened. “Don’t give me that hogwash! How did you get here?”

“I...” Jupiter began, swallowing hard. “I don’t know. And I’m afraid that’s not hogwash, it’s the truth. I haven’t the faintest idea how I got here or where we are. I can’t remember anything.”

The snow was blindingly bright and covered the mountains in dreamlike white. The wind was icy and swept the warmth from his body. Pete looked down at himself. He was wearing cut-off jeans and a thin T-shirt. No wonder he was freezing. What had he been thinking, going on a skiing holiday in these clothes?

His girlfriend Kelly, standing next to him, laughed at him. Why shouldn’t she? After all, she had thought of everything and was standing in front of him in a plump warm-looking pink ski suit, her eyes shielded from the brightness by dark ski goggles. She was tucking heartily into something that smelled intensely of fish. A fish burger?

Suddenly she grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. What was that all about? Did she think that would make him warm?

“Hey!” Kelly shouted and continued to shake him. “Hey you! Hey! Hey!”

“What are you doing?” protested Pete. “What are you doing?”

The shaking became more and more violent. “Wake up now!”

Wake up? What did she mean by waking up? He was wide awake in front of her! Wasn’t he? Or was it possible that he was dreaming? So that was the reason why he was in shorts in the middle of the snow...

“Hey!”

Pete woke up. “All right, all right!” he muttered. “I’m awake.”

He opened his eyes. It was still glaringly bright around him, and the cold had not disappeared. So was it a dream after all? He looked down at himself—cut-off jeans and a thin T-shirt... at least that part of the dream was real.

Pete turned his head. There was indeed a girl squatting next to him who had shaken him awake. But it wasn’t Kelly. The girl had brown, wild curls and freckles and was wearing jeans and a white hoodie. Pete had never seen her before.

“What... what happened?”

“If I only knew. You’re finally awake! I thought you were in a coma or something!”

“Coma? I...” Pete broke off.

Bummer! He wasn’t able to form a clear thought at all. So he had been dreaming, okay. Still, it was white around him and it was cold. And something still smelled like fish, although there was no fish burger to be seen far and wide. And there was a strange girl leaning over

him. White? Coma? Girl? Maybe he was in a hospital. But then why did it stink so badly here? “Did I have an accident?”

“What? No. That is, I don’t know.” The girl was visibly nervous. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“Pete,” Pete said. “Pete Crenshaw. Where am I?”

“You... you don’t know?” She looked at him out of big brown eyes. Then she slid a little to the side to reveal the view of the cell.

Pete straightened up, irritated. What he saw reminded him of a hospital operating theatre. However, it was not particularly clean. And the furnishings consisted only of a few fluorescent tubes under the ceiling that produced the blindingly bright light. There was a door, but no windows.

“Do you recognize this place?” the girl asked hopefully.

“Recognize? No. I’ve never been here before. How did I get here?”

“Tell me, are you listening to me at all? I... don’t... know. I woke up here fifteen minutes ago and I haven’t the faintest idea where we are. I was hoping you could tell me!”

“Me? Why?” Pete broke off.

He tried to remember. Why was he here? How had he got here? But in his mind, there was absolute emptiness. What had been before his sleep... was gone. He had no idea what day it was. Pete glanced at his digital watch—3:12 pm, Saturday, 4th October.

Okay, very slowly now. He felt as if he had slept all night. So what had it been yesterday? Yesterday, Friday? What had he been doing? Where had he been? With whom? Why?

“Hello?” the girl called out, half annoyed, half afraid, waving her hand in front of his face. “Are you still there? Are you all right?”

Another question that Pete could hardly answer. Was he all right? How did he feel? He had absolutely no idea. He was somewhat confused. Also, his stomach didn’t feel very well. It was empty. And the intense smell of fish was getting to him. Nevertheless, he said: “Yes, everything’s fine. I think so. Tell me, who are you?”

“Jolene Sprague.”

“And you yourself just—”

“—Woke up, yes. And I have no idea where we are. What... what’s going on? Have we been kidnapped? By whom? What do they want from us? I...” Jolene broke off. She took a deep breath, and continued in a trembling voice: “You must know something!”

“But I don’t know anything!” Pete replied a little sharper than he had wanted. “I... I have to come to myself first, you know? Wake up... Clear my head...”

Jolene looked at him as if he had suggested playing a game of cards first. She stood up and walked up and down the cell, wringing her hands. Finally, she stopped at the grey door and kicked it. “Hey!”

“The door is probably—”

“Locked, that’s right,” Jolene interrupted him again. “I tried to get it open a hundred times earlier.”

“Jolene,” Pete began and struggled to stand up, “I’m not sure I’ve got this all right, but... can you remember anything about this place? Or with how you got here? Because I seem to have... problems with my memory.”

Jolene stopped and looked at him in dismay. “You’re not the only one.”

“Are you saying—”

“That I don’t remember anything either? That’s exactly what it is.”

2. Knocking Messages

Shawn, the young man's name, as Jupiter had found out in the meantime, had calmed down a little. He was still staring darkly at Jupiter, but at least he no longer gave the impression of wanting to grab Jupiter's throat at any moment.

Restlessly, they both paced up and down the cell. Jupiter had fallen into a thoughtfulness that seemed to make Shawn nervous.

"What are you always pinching your lower lip for?" he hissed at him. "It's driving me crazy!"

"I'm thinking," Jupiter murmured. "You should do that too"

"What do you think I'm doing? I'm thinking too!" Shawn yelled. "I'm thinking about how to get out of here!"

"I'm more concerned with how we got in here. What are your last memories?"

"Memories? Of what?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Shawn stopped for a moment. "I was at a new club in LA last night. And then..." He frowned. "I don't know. I kind of blacked out."

"Have you been drinking alcohol?"

"I could have. I don't know. Not much anyway, I drove there."

"So excessive alcohol consumption doesn't seem to be the reason for your amnesia," Jupiter noted.

"Excuse me? Tell me, is that how you usually talk?"

Jupiter blushed slightly. "Uh... I... talk like this. I can't help it. Shawn, are you sure your visit to the club was yesterday?"

"What are you saying?"

"If you can't remember, how do you know it hasn't been a while?"

"What do I know, it feels like it was yesterday, okay? What about you?" Shawn now wanted to know. "What exactly do you remember?"

"Nothing special," Jupiter answered hesitantly. "Just a normal school day. I came home, ate something, hung around the salvage yard..."

"Salvage yard?"

"Yeah... my uncle owns a salvage yard. Since I live with my uncle and aunt, I spend most of my day there. Anyway, I could remember I was working at the salvage yard with my friend Pete. And from then on... everything starts to blur. My memories somehow got lost in nothingness. I can't even tell what I did that night anymore."

He looked down at himself. He was still wearing the same old jeans, the not-so-clean T-shirt and the trainers whose soles were almost worn through and even broken in one place. The shoes particularly irritated him, without him being able to say why. "Anyway, I haven't changed since then... Strange... Really most peculiar."

"Strange," Shawn mimicked him, rolling his eyes and continuing his wandering around the cell.

"Listen, Shawn, I know you're confused and unsettled. I don't feel any different. But still, we should make an effort to work together. Maybe we can reconstruct what happened.

For example, who did you meet in that club? Maybe that will help us.”

“Look, kid, this nonsense is getting on my nerves. I just want to get out of here, okay? You can do your interview later.” Shawn stomped to the door and kicked it angrily before slipping his back against it in frustration and ruffling his dishevelled hair.

“Here you go,” Jupiter said in a huff. “You can try kicking the door down. I’m curious to see how far you go.”

Shawn growled something unintelligible without looking up.

Jupiter sighed. At the moment, there was probably little point in relying on Shawn’s cooperation. He had to develop a plan on his own. The steel door was massive and locked. What other possibilities were there?

Jupiter let his gaze wander. Just below the ceiling ran a corroded water pipe about the thickness of an arm. It came out of the wall and disappeared back into the wall at the other end of the cell. Maybe he could use one of the bolts connecting the individual pieces of pipe as a tool for the door... no, that wouldn’t work.

The fluorescent tubes were stained and dusty. One of the stain marks, vaguely shaped like an axe, reminded Jupiter of something. It was like a dream image that rose in his memory for a split second—an island—a brown island that looked like an axe, in a white sea....

But before Jupiter could really grasp the thought, he was distracted by a noise. A dull, echoing stomp sounded in the far distance. “Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“Shh!”

Jupiter crept to the door and put his ear to the cold steel. There it was again—a muffled hammering as if from road works five blocks away, except there was a strange, subterranean reverberation mixed in. The sound was coming from a building—from this building.

Then Juve exclaimed: “Someone’s banging on a door!”

Jolene talked and talked without a comma or a full stop. She told Pete in great detail about the time she had spent in front of the television with her little sister last night; what programme they had watched; what flavour the crisps had been; when she had gone to her room; what book she had been reading and for how long; that she had not yet changed and had probably just fallen asleep at some point.

Pete only listened with half an ear, but his mind was slowly clearing. He still didn’t know how he had got here, but at least the dizzy feeling and the nausea had almost disappeared. All that was left was the cold that gradually crept under his skin.

“I dreamed of some nonsense. I don’t remember... about my mother,” Jolene rattled on. “I was on a bus and... never mind. Anyway, I woke up, and I was here... just like that. That’s... That’s crazy, right? Am I schizophrenic or something? Is this a padded cell... or what? Pete!”

“I don’t know! I’m just as clueless as you are!”

“But there must be an explanation!”

“There is.”

“And what is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s more important that we get out of here first. I don’t like this place. It’s no better than a prison cell.”

“You don’t say.”

“Have you tried anything while I was asleep?” asked Pete.

“What do you mean?”

“Called for help, for example.”

Jolene shook her head.

Immediately Pete stood up, went to the steel door and banged on it three or four times with his fist. The tinny drumming was unpleasantly loud in this bare cell. Pete hoped that it could be heard just as loudly outside.

He listened. Nothing. After a few seconds, he pounded again, longer this time, but again there was no reaction from the other side. He had to hold out. Eventually someone on the other side would notice him.

Jolene joined him and together they pounded as loud as they could until their fists were numb and reddened. Exhausted, they took a break. At least the cold had disappeared from Pete’s body for a moment.

“Do you think anyone heard us?” Jolene asked.

“If there’s someone around, I’m sure they would. The question is, can they help us?”

“Will they help us?” added Jolene. “If we really have been kidnapped...” She shuddered.

Suddenly, there was a throb—far away.

“There is something!” whispered Pete.

The throbbing repeated.

“Someone’s answering us!” Jolene cried so excitedly that her voice cracked.

Immediately, she rushed back to the door and yelled: “Help! Help!” She started pounding again, but this time with a fervour that really scared Pete. “Help!”

“Jolene!” cried Pete, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Jolene, calm down!”

“I want to get out of here!” she screamed and kept pounding.

“Jolene!” Pete grabbed her arms and held her tight.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy? Let go of me!”

“Jolene! If you keep making such a spectacle, we’ll never find out what’s going on out there!”

She was seething with anger. “What’s going on? Perhaps there’s someone who could help us!”

“There’s someone who heard us, yes,” Pete agreed. “So you don’t have to keep hammering. But we need to hear him or her too, you understand? So pull yourself together and keep quiet!”

Jolene glared angrily at him, but gave up her resistance. Together they held their breath. Yes, someone was knocking, without a doubt—but it was far away. And it wasn’t getting any closer. And it sounded as desperate as her own attempt to attract attention.

After a while Pete said: “I don’t know whether to be reassured or horrified now. But it seems we are not the only prisoners here.”

“Wow, this is really getting us somewhere,” Shawn mocked after Jupiter pounded on the door. “I’m impressed.”

Jupiter decided not to let Shawn provoke him. The situation was too serious to be at each other’s throats. He only wanted one thing—to get out of here. And apparently there was someone out there somewhere who wanted that too. A vague feeling of hope spread through the pit of his stomach. They were not alone. That was good... because with any luck, it meant that Bob and Pete were nearby. This idea had occurred to Jupiter shortly after waking up. If Jupiter had ended up in this situation, it smelled an awful lot like a case he had stumbled into with his friends. He couldn’t remember, but... if Bob and Pete were around, everything would be fine... for sure.

“We have to communicate somehow with whoever is knocking out there,” Jupiter finally said.

“Well, go ahead and scream your head off. That’s hardly going to do any good. It’s much too far away.”

“I was thinking more of knocking messages,” Jupiter replied.

Shawn laughed contemptuously. “Are you trying to tell me you know Morse code?”

“Exactly.”

“Ha! Who would believe it? Were you in the army? I think you’re not even eighteen yet!”

Jupiter did not respond. “The problem will be that the reverberation of the knocks is so dull that you can hardly distinguish individual signals from each other. So it will be quite difficult to get a message across.”

“Shall I tell you what’s going to be difficult, wise guy?” Shawn mocked. “What if you’re the only one here who knows Morse code? So that’s of no use to you at all.”

Jupiter shook his head. “I admit I have no circumstantial evidence to support my guess, but I still think my friends are around... and they could decode my message.”

In an instant, Jupiter regretted his words because Shawn’s mockery turned back into cold anger from one second to the next. “So you do know something!” he hissed.

Jupiter involuntarily took two steps back. “Excuse me? No, I—”

“Of course you know something! How else would you know that your friends are here? Stop fooling around and tell me what’s going on! How did we get here? Who are you?”

“This is a misunderstanding! I really don’t know where we are or how we got here. My guess that my friends might be here is based solely on the fact that we have often found ourselves in unpredictable, frightening and threatening situations. We are investigators.”

“Don’t give me rubbish!”

“That’s the truth. I have a business card in my pocket. Wait a minute...” Jupiter rummaged in his pocket, but he found neither his card nor anything else. All his pockets were completely empty. “My wallet! My ID! Someone must have taken everything from me.”

Shawn looked hesitantly in his own pockets. “Me too, but that doesn’t mean I will buy your story.”

“Now listen to me,” Jupiter said angrily and resolutely took another step forward. “My friends and I have a detective business. We have been able to solve a number of mysterious cases. Whether you believe that or not, I honestly don’t care, but the fact is that I have some experience in dealing with strange situations. So it would be nice if you helped me. Together we can get out of here faster. But if you want to refuse, be my guest. Somehow I can still work without you.”

Shawn looked at him silently. It was obvious that his basic attitude towards Jupiter had not changed, but slowly he seemed to realize that his distrust wasn’t doing him much good either. “What are you going to do?”

“I want to communicate with my friends if they are out there. Knocking on the door won’t do it, the acoustics are just too bad. But I was just thinking of using that water pipe up there. Metal transmits the signal more clearly and better than air. With a bit of luck, the pipe will lead in the right direction. But I can’t reach it alone. You’ll have to help me.”

Shawn frowned, looking first at Jupiter, then at the water pipe, and finally back at Jupiter. “How is that going to work?”

“Put me on your shoulders and I—”

“On my shoulders? You?” Shawn laughed for the first time, showing flash white teeth. “How is that going to work? You must weigh—”

“Too much for you?” Jupiter let the mockery drip off him. “I actually thought you were an athletic, strong guy, but I must have been mistaken. There’s nothing but hot air under your T-shirt, huh?”

The mirth disappeared from Shawn’s face as quickly as it had come. “All right, then. Get on, but hurry up!”

Shawn squatted and Jupiter climbed onto his shoulders. Groaning, Shawn pushed himself up. His legs shook and he blushed until he finally stood up straight and relaxed a little. “Now get on with it!”

Jupiter knocked on the pipe:

Clack-clack! Clack. Clack. Clack-clack! Pause...
Clack-clack! Clack. Clack. Clack-clack!

Meanwhile, he imagined the sound being carried through the pipe, on and on, branching out and continuing in all directions, through different cells or rooms until finally his distress signal could be heard everywhere. It was a rather unrealistic idea, but it gave him courage.

Clack-clack! Clack. Clack. Clack-clack!

“You are knocking the same thing all over!” complained Shawn. “What’s that? SOS? Isn’t there any other way?”

“SOS would be ‘three times short, three times long, three times short’,” Jupiter replied and continued tapping incessantly. “But SOS is so well-known that even someone who doesn’t know Morse code would recognize it. I don’t want to attract attention from the wrong people.”

“So what is it then?”

“A question mark. ‘Twice short, twice long, twice short’ is a question mark.”

“Excuse me? The question mark? Can you please tell me how a question mark is supposed to help us?”

“Wait and see,” Jupiter replied and continued tapping.

“Wait and see? Listen! You’re not exactly a flyweight, Jupiter!” Shawn suddenly faltered.

Jupiter tried to hold on to the pipe, but Shawn took two steps to the side and Jupiter had to let go. This threw them both completely off balance, and suddenly the First Investigator was in free fall. He hit the cold tiles hard. “Man! What are you doing?”

“I don’t feel like it anymore,” Shawn replied. “Question mark? Utter nonsense! I don’t believe a word you say! You’re hiding something from me. I’m not stupid! What is this, some kind of mind game? But you know what? Play on your own! I’m not doing this anymore!” Shawn returned to the corner where Jupiter had first seen him an hour ago, sat down and glared at him.

Jupiter sighed. How was he supposed to convince Shawn? Whatever Jupiter did or said only seemed to increase his mistrust. Maybe he really should go on alone and pretend Shawn didn’t exist. Then at least he wouldn’t run the risk of falling down again.

But before Jupiter came to a conclusion, his attention was diverted. A hollow, metallic clack broke the silence. Jupiter and Shawn simultaneously turned their eyes to the water pipe. The signal was not very loud, but it was clear enough:

Clack-clack! Clack. Clack. Clack-clack!

Jupiter smiled. "I think we have contact."

3. Contact

Clack! Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Pause...
Clack-clack-clack! Pause...
Clack. Pause...
Clack-clack! Clack. Clack. Clack-clack!

Pete let go of the water pipe and came bouncing to the ground. He was grinning up to both ears.

“What was that about?” asked Jolene.

“One, s, t, question mark,” Pete translated the signal he had just transmitted.

“One, s, t, question mark?” Jolene wondered. “What’s that? ‘First?’”

“Yes,” Pete said. “My message means: ‘First, is that you?’ I’m asking if he is the First Investigator. I’m sure he’ll understand... if it is him...”

“Investigator?” asked Jolene uncomprehendingly.

Before Pete could answer, the reply came:

Clack. Clack! Clack. Clack. Pause...
Clack! Pause...
Clack-clack-clack!

–YES–

Pete jumped up. “It’s Jupiter! It’s really Jupiter! Jolene, we’re saved!”

“I... I don’t understand. Who is Jupiter?”

“Jupiter is the smartest person under the sun, and he’s around somewhere. He’ll get us out of here... for sure.”

Immediately Pete jumped up to the water pipe, held on with one hand and transmitted a new message with the other. Then he dropped down again and waited anxiously for the answer. And so it went back and forth. Because of the difficulty of transmission, the exchange took place in telegram style where messages were abbreviated to pack information into the smallest possible number of words or characters.

Busy as a woodpecker on a log, Pete tapped out one message after the next, translating the tenacious conversation piece by piece to the eager Jolene. And as steadily as a woodpecker hollows out wood, the First Investigator’s answers hollowed out Pete’s hope until it finally lay on the floor like finely crumbled chips.

(Pete) –PETE HERE... WHERE R U–

(Jupe) –WHITE CELL... NO WINDOWS... DOOR LOCKED–

(Pete) –SAME... 2 OF US–

(Jupe) –BOB?–

(Pete) –NO... GIRL–

(Jupe) –WHERE IS BOB?–

(Pete) –N I–(That stood for ‘No Idea’.)

(Jupe) –*WHAT HAPPENED?*–

(Pete) –*N I*–

(Jupe) –*MEMORY GONE?*–

(Pete) –*YES*–

(Jupe) –*SAME*–

(Pete) –*CAN ESCAPE?*–

(Jupe) –*LOCK PICKS?*–

(Pete) –*GONE... HOW?*–

(Jupe) –*N I*–

Again Shawn began to stagger.

“Don’t throw me off!” warned Jupiter.

“Then hurry up!” groaned Shawn. “I can’t hold you much longer!”

“Just a moment,” Jupiter replied, tapping out one last message:

–*ANY TOOLS NE*–

Shawn’s legs buckled. Jupiter clung to the pipe and was suddenly suspended in mid-air, his face pressed against the greasy white tile wall.

“You’re too heavy,” Shawn muttered.

Jupiter groaned, contemplating which was more inelegant—dropping like a wet sack or getting stuck like a piece of meat on a hook until Shawn bailed him out.

The decision was taken away from him, for suddenly there was a creaking and cracking sound, and with a rain of dust and plaster, a metal bracket tore out of the wall. The pipe broke through and crashed down along with the First Investigator. For the second time in a few minutes, he hit the ground extremely hard. Foul-smelling, brown water splashed out of the hole in the wall for a few seconds.

Jupiter struggled to get up. Shawn just looked at him silently. He did not even grin maliciously. He left Jupiter to get up all by himself, which made the First Investigator even angrier.

“No harm done, thank you for asking.” He glanced up.

Part of the pipe was still sticking out of the wall. There should be no problem in continuing to communicate with Pete. On the contrary, Jupiter could now use the broken piece for tapping and thus no longer had to rely on Shawn’s support. But as he turned to finish his message, he startled.

Something was hanging from the ceiling—a black box. Neither Jupiter nor Shawn had noticed it before because the shadow of the water pipe had hidden it. But now that the pipe had broken off, it was hard to miss. Jupiter moved closer and squinted his eyes. The thing was about half the size of a shoebox, matt black and made of metal. Then he realized what it was.

The fear he had felt after waking up was suddenly back—cold, almost tangible fear that spread throughout his body like slowly freezing water from his stomach. Suddenly he became aware of the cold in the room again—he got goose bumps. With a trembling hand, he pointed to the black object.

Now Shawn saw it too. “This... this can’t be.” And Jupiter saw the same transformation take place in his face.

“There is little doubt, I’m afraid,” the First Investigator replied in a strained voice.

“Either all this, this cell, the whole situation is a big joke that I’m afraid I don’t understand...

or the situation is much more dangerous and unpredictable than we could have even guessed so far.”

Pete jumped up, holding onto the water pipe with one hand and tapping a message with the other.

–*STILL HERE?*–

Then he let himself fall and looked up anxiously. Jupiter had broken off in mid-sentence, followed by a disturbingly loud noise. Since then, there had been dead silence.

They waited spellbound for an answer. Finally, after a few minutes, the knocking returned. Pete breathed a sigh of relief.

“What is it?” asked Jolene impatiently. “What is he saying?”

Pete concentrated on the Morse code and finally translated:

–*SORRY... DISTRACTED... CELL SEARCHED?*–

“Cell searched? What does he mean by that?” Pete wondered.

“Well, did we search the cell?”

“But there’s nothing to search here. It’s empty.” Pete swung up again and tapped a quick:

–*YES*–

The answer came promptly:

–*ABOVE PIPE?*–

Pete frowned and stood on his tiptoes.

“What’s wrong?” Jolene asked.

“Jupiter thinks we should look above the pipe.”

He took a few steps back and jumped up to take a look in the dark area that lay between the pipe and the ceiling, but there was nothing there. Pete walked backwards until his back hit the cold, greasy tiles and stood on tiptoe. Then he saw it.

At the very back on the right, something was hanging directly under the ceiling—a box—black and dull and fitted with a tiny red lamp whose light pulsed slowly. At the front of the box was a round, shiny something—a lens.

The shock was so great that Pete held his breath in horror.

“What is it?” asked Jolene worriedly, following Pete’s gaze. Then she saw it too.

“A camera!” cried Pete. “We’re... we’re being filmed! No way!”

The surveillance camera was oriented in such a way that it captured about three quarters of the cell. When Pete got over the initial shock, he instantly moved out of the angle of the lens.

“Jolene!” he whispered, beckoning the girl towards him. “Come here!” Jolene was visibly irritated, but then followed him.

“We’ve been watched the whole time,” Pete murmured. “Possibly even eavesdropping! The camera is probably equipped with a microphone. I just don’t believe it! What is the meaning of this?”

“What...? I... I don’t know.”

Pete thought feverishly. They were being watched. By whom? Why? What was going on here? What was he supposed to do now? Talk to whoever was sitting at the other end watching them? If anyone was sitting there at all. Maybe it was just being recorded.

The knocking on the pipe jolted him out of his thoughts.

—OK?—

Pete translated and hurried to tell Jupe about his discovery.

(Pete) —*CAMERA FOUND*—

(Jupe) —*SAME HERE*—

(Pete) —*WHAT FOR?*—

(Jupe) —*NI*—

(Pete) —*WHAT NOW?*—

(Jupe) —*TURN IT OFF*—

Switch it off! Of course. Pete could have thought of that himself. He had avoided the camera as if it were a bomb. It was as if the enemy Pete had suspected was out there somewhere had suddenly walked in. Identity and motive were as mysterious as before, but now it was certain—there was someone—someone who was watching them—who had followed their every step so far. It was an unknown presence flaunting its superiority through the camera. The perpetrator knew who they were, what they were doing and what they were saying. Pete and Jolene, on the other hand, knew nothing.

The Second Investigator broke free from his rigidity. He ran towards the camera and jumped up. His fingers grazed the box but that was not enough.

“Pete, what... what are you doing?”

“You’re still asking that? Jolene, we are being watched!”

“Yes, but...”

“But what?”

Jolene did not answer. Pete frowned. What objections could she have? The Second Investigator didn’t want to be watched and overheard a second longer! Shaking his head, he turned back to the camera. It hung too high to reach with a pull-up on the pipe... but not unreachably high—not for nothing was he one of the best players on the school basketball team.

Pete went to the far corner of the cell. The camera eye now had a close look at him. Pete glared angrily at it.

“*Hasta la vista*, baby,” he growled and took a running start. Two, three long strides, then the leap. Pete flew through the air, lunged and hit the lens with his clenched fist.

The surveillance camera came loose from its attachment and then dangled from the ceiling by a cable. Now Pete could reach it easily. He gave it another blow and the camera sailed across the cell. With an ugly splinter, it breathed its last. The red flashing light went out.

4. Trust No One

Jupiter weighed the camera in his hand. It looked like a surveillance camera used in banks or department stores, only a little less clunky.

The First Investigator had managed to dismantle it without damaging it. He only had to pull off the cable that led from the camera into the wall. The transmission was thus interrupted. Whoever had been watching them for the last hour would see nothing now.

Shawn approached and looked first at the camera, then at Jupiter's face. His expression was difficult to interpret.

"Now Big Brother has a problem," Jupiter said.

"Hopefully his problem won't become ours," Shawn remarked.

"What do you mean?"

Again Shawn looked at Jupiter as if seeing him for the first time.

"What's wrong?" Jupiter asked.

Shawn shook his head wordlessly and turned away. But Jupiter had become alert. Shawn was acting strangely. Something was going on. Jupiter just didn't know what.

"Would you be so kind as to answer me?" he asked.

"What is it?" asked Shawn irritably. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what you think about this... about the camera, I mean... about the fact that someone has been watching us for the last hour."

"It's awesome, yeah," was the dispassionate reply. "So?"

"Well, now we know we didn't get into this by accident!" Jupe exclaimed.

"Not by chance! You don't say! You rarely get into a warehouse by accident and can't remember anything!"

Jupiter frowned. "Into a warehouse? What makes you think that we're in a warehouse?"

"What do I know! I just thought so! This looks like a warehouse, doesn't it? Don't get on my nerves now! You'd better figure out how to get out of here, if you're such a great investigator! What about your friend on the other side? Pounding on water pipes won't get us anywhere!"

Jupiter nodded and turned back to the pipe. He was sure that Shawn was hiding something from him, but he had to play it cool so as not to reveal his suspicions.

The First Investigator concentrated and tapped the next message to Pete:

—TRUST NO ONE—

"What did your friend say?" Jolene wanted to know. But Pete hesitated with the interpretation. Had he understood correctly?

By that, Jupiter could really only mean Jolene—which meant that Pete might be better off not interpreting this message. "He... he's asking if I've been successful," Pete answered hesitantly, tapping back a quick:

—OK—

Then he looked at the remains of the camera, still untouched in the corner. He had an idea.

"This camera..." he muttered and picked it up.

"What about it?"

"It's made of metal," Pete said.

"Yeah. Sure."

"And it's already broken anyway."

"Right, so?"

Pete dropped the camera. Then he lifted his right foot and let the heel of his shoes come crashing down on the black casing with all his might. With a crunch that hurt his ears, the expensive piece of technology broke. Pete kicked again. And again. After the fourth kick, the case finally lay before him only in fragments, revealing its interior. Cables and circuit boards protruded from the wreckage like the skeleton of a dead animal.

Jolene was stunned. "What are you doing? You could have used that thing!"

"Yeah, sure. We'll get really cosy in here and shoot a little home video."

"I don't mean it like that! But can you explain to me what the point of breaking it?"

"Yes," Pete said, bending down to the camera's component parts. "I can."

Layer by layer, he uncovered the inside of the camera and dug through the tangle of cables until he finally found what he was looking for—a small metal bracket that had held the circuit board in place in the casing. Then he found a second, longer strip of metal.

Triumphantly, he held both aloft.

"With any luck, this is our way out."

Hope and doubt were reflected in Jolene's gaze. "What do you mean by that?"

Pete went to the steel door and took a closer look at the lock. As a test, he inserted one metal piece into the keyhole, felt around in it, pulled it out and bent a small piece at right angles with his teeth.

"Wait a minute! Can you open this lock?"

"I could, with a bit of luck."

"That's... that's great! But how do you do that? First Morse code and now this! Has this got to do with that detective stuff?"

"Well, a bit," Pete replied.

In the meantime, he had told Jolene a little about The Three Investigators. While he was bending and trying out the two metal pieces, he continued: "Our headquarters is in Jupiter's uncle's salvage yard... and there are always lots of old doors and dismantled locks lying around. At some point, I started messing around with it."

"With what?"

"Picking locks. It's not so difficult once you know how to do it. Aha... I've got it now!"

"Can you open it?" asked Jolene hopefully.

"Not yet. But at least I know now how the mechanism is constructed. It may still take a while."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"We'll see." Pete continued to work.

"That third detective you told me about," Jolene continued curiously. "Do you think he's here too?"

"Bob?" Pete said. "I don't know. He doesn't seem to be with Jupiter. I haven't seen him at all in the last few days, so I don't know if... I just can't remember, you know? I hope he's all right."

Pete felt queasy at the thought of Bob. He had been so relieved to get a sign of life from Jupiter! The fact that he still had none from Bob could be a good sign... or a bad one.

Click!

Pete paused. The mechanism inside the lock had given way.

“What is it?” asked Jolene excitedly.

Pete lowered his voice involuntarily. “I think... I’ve opened the door!”

5. A Trail to Nowhere

The sun was burning so strongly that afternoon that Bob Andrews was glad when he was able to turn onto the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard on his bike and dive into the cool shade of the high wooden fence. His sunny yellow Beetle, which he had lent to Jupiter and Pete because Pete's car had broken down, was parked nearby. So the two of them were probably here.

He had just got off his bike when Mathilda Jones, Jupiter's aunt, came running towards him in a flurry of excitement. "Bob! Bob! Thank goodness, you're here at last! Bob!"

Bob turned to Aunt Mathilda in surprise. "What is it, Mrs Jones?"

"Bob!" Aunt Mathilda reached him breathlessly. "Do you know where Jupe is?"

"Jupe? No. I was hoping he'd be here."

"And Pete?"

"I have absolutely no idea. Why? Did something happen?"

"Did something happen?" Aunt Mathilda's voice tipped into hysterics. She grabbed him by the shoulders. "So you really don't know what I'm talking about? Are you serious? Don't joke with me, Bob Andrews!"

Now Bob was starting to get scared. "This is no joke. I was with my parents for three days at my aunt's in Idaho. We just got back half an hour ago. I got right on my bike and rode out here to see if there was anything new."

"There is something new, indeed!" cried Aunt Mathilda. "Jupe has disappeared! And Pete too!"

"Disappeared? What do you mean?"

"That they are gone! This morning I was surprised that Jupe didn't want to get up at all. So I went to his room to wake him up... but he wasn't there! He hasn't been there all night!"

"Maybe he just got up early."

But Aunt Mathilda shook her head resolutely. "His bed was made. Jupe never makes his bed. I always do. That means he hasn't been in it at all since yesterday. I immediately phoned your parents and the Crenshaws. I managed to get hold of Mrs Crenshaw... and guess what? Pete has gone too! Please, Bob, if you know something, you have to tell me!"

Before Bob could answer, Uncle Titus rushed up, no less excited than his wife. "Well?" he called out. "What is it? Do you know where they are, Bob?"

"No, I... I'm sorry, Mr Jones, I'm completely at a loss. I can't explain what happened."

"But this has something to do with your detective games!" Aunt Mathilda was excited. "Don't fool me!"

"We had no case in progress at all when I went to Idaho. The last time I saw Jupe and Pete was on Wednesday, and we were just playing computer games. Everything was fine."

"But that can't be!" said Uncle Titus, nervously twirling his enormous black moustache. "Where can they be?"

"What happened last night?" asked Bob. "Did Jupe say anything?"

"It was all as usual!" assured Aunt Mathilda. "Titus and I were watching a detective show on TV and Jupe said goodnight. That was around ten. Then he went to his room."

"Did you check on him again after that?"

“Please!” said Aunt Mathilda indignantly. “Do you think I check every evening to see if he’s properly tucked in? He’s not a baby anymore! Besides, he usually goes to bed after us... except yesterday.”

“You know what,” Bob said, forcing a smile. “It will probably clear up quite easily. I’m sure Jupe got up very early today to do something completely harmless... and to please you, he fixed his bed himself.”

“He hasn’t had breakfast!” Aunt Mathilda objected energetically. “I saw that from the orange juice bottle. It’s just as full as yesterday. And Jupiter without breakfast? That’s quite impossible. So he wasn’t at home last night. That’s... a logical conclusion, isn’t it? I learned a bit from your detective stuff.”

“Bob, you must know something! Where’s our boy? We already wanted to look in your trailer, but we don’t have a key.”

“Calm down!” said Bob as insistently as possible. “Nothing could have happened to Jupe and Pete, I’m quite sure of that. I’ll go to the trailer now and see if I can find a message or something. Don’t worry about it!” He smiled encouragingly.

The smile only disappeared from Bob’s face when he had turned around and headed for Headquarters. He had no idea what was going on here. There was only one thing he was relatively sure of was that Aunt Mathilda was right in her suspicions—Jupe had not spent last night in his bed, and there was only one logical explanation for this—Jupe and Pete had been out exploring at night.

Unfortunately, Bob had absolutely no idea why or how. That meant that something must have happened while he was in Idaho—Jupe and Pete had got into a new case, had spent the last night investigating—and something had gone wrong... very wrong.

Inside the trailer, the desk was overflowing with paper. Stacks of magazines scattered on the floor. Dirty dishes were piled up in the tiny sink. Empty pizza boxes lay on the chairs and armchairs. So Headquarters looked the same as always. At first glance, there was nothing to suggest that anything out of the ordinary had happened in the three days of Bob’s absence. Why should it?

The answering machine was flashing and showed seven recorded messages. Bob played back the messages, but in all seven times, the caller just hung up without leaving a message.

“Well?” said a voice behind him. Bob winced. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus were standing in the doorway, watching him. He hadn’t even noticed that they had followed him.

“Well, at first glance, I don’t see anything unusual. I’ll see if I can find a message somewhere.” Bob turned around again. The Jones couple made no move to leave.

“This may take a while,” Bob added, but still there was no response from the pair.

Bob half-heartedly lifted a few stacks of papers and shifted slips of paper on the desk, but the presence of Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus made him so nervous that he could not concentrate.

“We’ll help you,” Aunt Mathilda said and set foot in the trailer.

“No!” shouted Bob louder than he had meant to. “I mean, better not. You see, the trailer is...” The trailer is their sanctuary, where adults have no business, it flashed through his mind, but of course he couldn’t say that. “It’s like a sensitive habitat. Everything has its place and must not be moved away. I can manage best on my own. Thank you.”

Disappointed, Aunt Mathilda withdrew. “But you’ll let me know immediately if you find anything,” she admonished him.

Bob nodded with a smile. “Yes, of course.”

Finally, the Jones couple trotted away. Bob closed the door with relief and took a deep breath. Then he let his gaze wander over the chaos, especially the desk. If there were notes

that Jupe or Pete had made, he would be most likely to find them there. Bob sat down on the office chair and began to sift through the sheets of papers.

After the desk, it was the turn of the files and books lying on the floor. Then the laboratory located in the back of the trailer, and finally the documents on the computer. Bob checked everything that had been used in the last three days, including Internet access. None of it got him anywhere except for a scrawled note in Jupe's handwriting on a piece of paper—an address and a telephone number, both of which were unfamiliar to Bob.

Bob looked at the paper thoughtfully. Did it have anything at all to do with Jupe and Pete's disappearance? There was only one way to find out. Bob reached for the telephone and dialled the strange number. It rang three times, then a male voice answered.

"Good afternoon, this is William Boyd."

"Uh, hello, this is Bob An—"

"At the moment, I am not my office. You can reach me in the morning between ten and twelve. In urgent cases, please leave a message after the signal... Beep!"

"Uh... hi, this is Bob Andrews. We don't know each other, but..." Bob paused. What was he doing anyway? Surely he couldn't tell this stranger that he was looking for Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw? What if this William Boyd was responsible for their disappearance? Bob had no idea what his friends were involved in. "... But it would be nice if you called me back." Bob gave the number of Headquarters and hung up.

He groaned. That had been a mistake, he knew, but before he could think about it in more detail, the phone rang. Bob's heart jumped a little. William Boyd? Maybe he had just come into the office and was calling back immediately. But what could he tell him? Or perhaps it was Jupe! Yes, exactly! The First Investigator had guessed that Bob was at Headquarters and was now calling him to clear everything up.

Bob snatched up the telephone. "Hello?"

"Bob! Hi! You're back!"

It wasn't Jupiter... nor was it William Boyd. It was Jelena Charkova, a friend of The Three Investigators—a friend of Bob's, to be precise.

"Jelena," Bob groaned. "It's you. Tell me, did you call here seven times earlier?"

"That's quite a greeting," Jelena grumbled. "No, I haven't. What else?"

"I'm sorry. Don't take it personally. I was hoping you were Jupe."

"Of course. A call from your leader, whom you see on average sixteen hours a day, is more important than anything else. Bob Andrews, you should really think seriously about such codependent relationships."

"You don't understand, Jelena. Jupe has disappeared... and Pete too... since last night. No one knows where they are, including me because I just got back from Idaho today."

"Disappeared?" asked Jelena in surprise. "That's quite a thing, and yet I was on the phone with Jupiter yesterday."

"You what?"

"Yes. Of course I actually wanted to talk to you, not Jupiter, but you weren't there."

"When exactly was that, Jelena? And what did Jupe say?"

Jelena thought for a moment. "It must have been around four in the afternoon. Jupiter just told me that you were visiting relatives and wanted to hang up so as not to talk to me for a second longer than necessary. But to annoy him, I engaged him in a conversation. I asked him if you had a new case in the works and so on."

"And what did he say?"

"Indeed we have," Jelena mimicked the First Investigator's tone. "And that is why, unfortunately, I am now unable to continue our conversation, Jelena. You see, we have to

trail a suspicious individual.”

“A suspicious individual? Who?”

“He didn’t tell me that, of course.”

“Do you know what it was about?”

“No, I don’t know. You know, Jupiter doesn’t like to give away details, and certainly not to me... You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m worried! His aunt and uncle have just besieged me. They are completely desperate. I have to do something, but I don’t know what.”

“Have you searched the trailer yet?”

“Just done.”

“Well?”

Bob sighed. “I found a note with a phone number and an address. I’ve already called the number and it goes to the answering machine of someone called William Boyd, whom I’ve never heard of.”

“And what is this address?”

“32 Richmond Road.”

“So, does that mean anything to you?” Jelena asked.

“No. I know Richmond Road is in West Hollywood—a fancy neighbourhood, but I have no idea who lives there.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Find out!”

6. The Mad Woman

32 Richmond Road was a Spanish-style apartment building with a bright yellow façade and a reddish-brown shingle roof. It was located on a street lined with royal palms right next to a park.

Next to the entrance, a lattice-barred archway led to the courtyard where a colourful flower bed glowed. The balconies facing the street were deserted. Only on the first floor did a woman in a leopard-patterned swimming costume and sunglasses sit, holding her apparently freshly painted fingernails to dry in the sun.

Bob, who had stopped by the road, cast a sceptical glance out the side window of his old Beetle. He had hoped that the address on Jupe's note would hide something else—a business, for example, a restaurant, a company, an office, whatever... but this was just an ordinary apartment building—a nice and expensive one, admittedly, but nevertheless just an apartment building.

How was Bob supposed to find out what Jupe and Pete had been doing here... if they had ever been here at all. He had already made a round of the building and read the names on the intercom panel without coming across anything. Now he sat back in the car and thought about what to do next.

Bob was completely lost in thought when suddenly a hand slapped the side window of the driver's door!

"Jelena!"

"Hi. Am I late?"

"What are you doing here?"

"What do you think? I'm supporting you in your detective work. But do we have to discuss this through the window or can I come in?"

Bob nodded in bewilderment and opened the passenger door. Jelena circled the car and set about climbing in. The girl had been a paraplegic since a childhood accident and was in a wheelchair, but getting into the car was no problem for Jelena.

"How did you get here?" Bob glanced at the wheelchair standing on the pavement outside.

"Not with this, of course! By taxi. I had the address. Have you found out anything yet? Any leads on William Boyd?"

Bob shook his head. "It's nice of you to want to help me. I just did some preliminary checks around the building, but I'm afraid there's nothing I need help with."

"What if we ask the residents here about Jupiter and Pete?"

"Just like that? There are at least a dozen apartments in there. Are we supposed to press every intercom? That's not a good idea, Jelena. We could only make things worse."

"What do you think happened? Have they been kidnapped?"

"If I only knew! I have absolutely no clue. But Aunt Mathilda and Pete's parents will get the police involved tonight at the latest if I don't find out anything by then. I—"

Bonk!

Bob winced. The dull, metallic sound had been very close. He looked around. A boy was just passing by on a skateboard, otherwise the street was deserted. "Did you hear that?"

"I'm not deaf," Jelena replied. "It sounded like someone—"

Bonk!

"—Hit the roof of my car!" Bob finished the sentence and looked up angrily through the windscreen. There was nothing to be seen. "But how can that—"

Bonk! A rotten, squashed orange slid down the window from the roof, leaving a greasy, wet trail.

In no time at all, Bob was out of his car. On the car roof were two more oranges with their mouldy grey peels cracked open. Bob looked around furiously, but still he could not see anyone.

Splat! This orange hit the hot asphalt and narrowly missed the Beetle and its driver. But this time, Bob was able to make out where the projectile had come from. He looked up. The woman in the leopard dress, who had been sunning herself on her balcony, was holding a bowl of oranges and was already aiming the next one.

"Hey! Stop that!"

"Will you get out of here!" she nagged in a strangely sing-songy voice. "Go on, get out of here, you horrible paparazzi! There's nothing to see here! And take the wheelchair with you!"

Bob was so taken aback by this woman's impertinence that he couldn't get a word out for seconds.

Jelena was all the quicker for it. She rolled down the window and called out: "Are you still all right, lady? Or has the sun toasted your brain?"

"I'm tired of you guys hanging around outside my apartment all the time!"

"Your apartment?" replied Bob.

"Yes, my apartment, whose else? I'm not broke, no matter what the papers say! You reporters can never leave a star like me alone! Now get out of here or I'll call the police!"

"Firstly, we are standing on a public road, and here we can stay as long as we want. And secondly... I don't know who you are at all."

"Ha!" the woman groaned hysterically. It almost sounded like a laugh. "And you expect me to believe that? I know exactly what you're up to! You're going to stand around here for hours again, watching me and secretly taking photos and then sell them to the newspapers!"

"I'm sorry, but you must confused us with somebody else. We don't want to take photos. We don't even have a camera with us."

"Oh no?" the woman exclaimed, leaning so far over the balcony parapet that she would have made an excellent photo subject at that moment. It almost looked as if she was waiting for Bob to pull out a camera and pull the trigger. "And I guess you didn't have a camera yesterday either, huh?"

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, yesterday... or do you think I don't recognize your car?"

At that moment, it dawned on Bob. "The car!" he murmured to Jelena.

"What about the car?" she whispered back.

"I lent the Beetle to Jupe and Pete for the time I was away because Pete's MG is in the workshop. That crazy woman up there recognized the car! That means..." Bob didn't finish the thought, but now turned and spoke again to the woman on the balcony, who had already thrown herself into a new pose. "When were we supposed to have been standing here yesterday?"

"Well, yesterday afternoon, you wise guy! For hours! And then you even followed poor Jonathan! But the editors weren't happy with the photos, were they? Anyway, I couldn't find

them in any newspaper today. And now you're here to take new ones... but not with me!" She tossed her blonde curls over her shoulder and pushed her sunglasses into her hair.

"Jonathan?" asked Bob as casually as possible.

"Yes, Jonathan!" the woman yelled angrily. "Jonathan Thorndike, now don't act so hypocritical! What now? Will you leave voluntarily, or shall I call the police?"

"We're going," Bob replied. "But you're lucky the oranges didn't leave any dents in my car roof, else I'll be the one calling the police on you."

"You... you really want to leave?" The mad woman did not even try to hide her bewilderment. Then she suddenly became angry. "You brats! Take my picture! Get me in the paper! Go!" She grabbed another piece of fruit and threw it at Bob.

Bob hurried to get into the car. "The old lady's out of her mind!" He started the engine.

"Hey, my wheelchair!" Jelena shouted and opened the door.

"I have to move my car away quickly before she throws the whole orange tree at me," Bob exclaimed. "Can you ride to the back of the building and I'll meet you there, okay?"

Jelena nodded and climbed out of the car. As soon as she was safely in the wheelchair, Bob stepped on the accelerator. He drove to the next street corner and turned right. At the back of the building, he parked up the verge and waited for Jelena.

"Man, Hollywood!" Jelena remarked as she rolled up to Bob. "Only crazy stars, ex-stars and those who think they are stars. This lady seems to belong to the third category."

"Still, I don't think she was lying. She saw my car outside this building yesterday, so Jupe and Pete must have been here! And we know what they were doing here too—watching Jonathan Thorndike, otherwise they wouldn't have gone after him. I saw his name on the intercom panel earlier, Jelena. This Thorndike lives here!"

"And who is he? Another pseudo star?"

"I have no idea. But we'll find out!"

But it was not as simple as Bob had imagined. There was only one entrance to the building, and it was guarded by the mad woman.

"There's only one way," Bob said as they stood at the wall that surrounded the property. "I'll have to climb over." Bob avoided looking at the wheelchair.

"Climb over?" echoed Jelena. "Great! And what about me?"

"You stay here. After all—"

"We could just press on Thorndike's intercom and enter the building the normal way!" Jelena interrupted him gruffly. "Ignore that maniac on the balcony!"

"That's too dangerous, Jelena. We don't know who this Thorndike is and what he has to do with Jupe and Pete's disappearance. And as long as we don't—"

"Oh, nonsense! The truth is that poor, disabled Jelena and her wheelchair are once again in the way when the great detective gets down to his investigative work. Great, Bob! But you know what? I'm not your slave. I can do what I want. And I want to be there when—"

"Shh!" Bob hissed, put his finger to his lips imploringly, unceremoniously grabbed Jelena's wheelchair and pushed her a few metres away from the wall.

"Are you crazy?" Jelena said indignantly, but Bob did not respond.

"Well, firstly, not so loud!" he whispered urgently. "Secondly, you know you're talking nonsense, Jelena. You're not in the way. But as long as the situation is uncertain, it's better if only one person puts himself in danger, and that should be the one who can get away faster in an emergency. You stay behind for safety and get help if something goes wrong."

"You're already talking like Jupiter," Jelena growled and crossed her arms angrily.

"And you should get out of the habit of always playing your wheelchair pity card to get your way." Bob bit his lips. He might have been better off keeping that to himself after all,

although that was exactly what he had meant. Jelena could get downright irascible. Tensely and anxiously, he waited for her reaction.

For a moment, she glared at him. But then her mouth twisted into a narrow grin. “If Jupiter Jones had said that, I’d be dumping a whole mountain of peppered, venomous and radiation-contaminated replies on him right now... but because it’s you... I’ll let this impertinence pass for once.

“Now get out of here! When I hear your death screams, I will rush to your aid with my warhorse of aluminium, steel and fibreglass-reinforced plastic and flatten all opponents.” She winked at him.

Bob smiled with relief. “That’s how we do it.” He returned to the wall, took momentum and climbed easily to the other side. Fortunately, there were some bushes planted there, behind which Bob could hide for the time being to study the layout of the place.

He was in the courtyard of the apartment complex, the centrepiece of which was a pool surrounded by palm trees. A small fountain splashed directly next to it. The lush greenery made the courtyard an oasis of peace. This place was almost in the heart of the movie city and yet it was so idyllic. Whoever lived here had money, Bob was sure.

There was nobody at the pool and balconies as far as Bob could see from his hiding place, but radio music was blaring from some of the open windows and the TV was on somewhere else. Bob struggled out of the undergrowth and crept around the pool to a large, metal-framed wooden door that led into the building. It stood open.

Bob entered a cool, marble-tiled hallway that led to a stairwell and a lift. If Bob had remembered the intercom panel correctly, Jonathan Thorndike lived on the second floor. He hurried up the stairs and a short time later, stood in a corridor from which four apartments were accessible. There was a sign on one of the doors: ‘Jonathan Thorndike, Kimberly Lloyd’.

So the mysterious Mr Thorndike did not live here alone. Bob was undecided what to do. But before he could develop a plan, a shrill female voice suddenly came from the apartment:

“Do you seriously think I’m going to believe that, Jim? I saw you! You were standing right in front of her, and suddenly... suddenly... she collapsed! Ah, no, you can tell me whatever you want. She fell... and there was blood! So much blood! You didn’t kill her, Jim! You didn’t kill her! I... Jim! Jim, why are you looking at me like that? You’re scaring me! What are you doing? What... Jim! Jim, stop it! I...

“Aaaaaahhhh! Help!”

7. Kimberly Lloyd

Bob acted without thinking. There was no more time for a plan. The woman was in danger! Wildly determined, he reached for the door knob. The door was locked. He rattled it. And finally pounded on it.

“Open up!” he roared. “Open the door now, or I’ll call the police!”

Inside it had become quiet. Was it already too late? But then suddenly something stirred behind the door. And a few seconds later, it was opened by a slender woman in a dressing gown. Her long brown hair was dishevelled and she looked at him in confusion.

“For heaven’s sake,” she said, laughing softly. “You... weren’t eavesdropping, were you?”

“Where is the guy?” asked Bob briskly, pushing past the woman into the apartment. “Did he threaten you? Do you want me to call the police?”

The apartment was large and sunlit. Colourful rugs and cushions were everywhere on the light parquet floor, there was little furniture. Bob looked to his left, looked to his right—and was startled. There was no one here.

The woman came up to him. She was grinning... and didn’t look a bit as if she had been threatened by someone just a few seconds ago. “Can I help you with something?”

“I... I thought... Didn’t you call for help?”

She shook her head and held up a small stack of stapled sheets. “That was Catherine.”

“Catherine?”

“The role for which I am learning the lines... because I’m an actress. I’m Kimberly Lloyd.”

“You... you were just acting that out?”

Instead of answering, Kimberly held the script under his nose. Bob skimmed through and saw the sentence: ‘Do you seriously think I’m going to believe that, Jim? I saw you!’

Bob felt the heat rising in his face. He would have liked to disappear into thin air. “I... I... I’m sorry, Miss Lloyd, I didn’t know...”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said and then burst into bell-like laughter. “After all, it means I must have played convincingly, doesn’t it?”

“Very convincing,” Bob grasped gratefully at the straw by which he could at least pull himself a bit out of the quagmire of embarrassment. “Really, that was... great class. Do you... do you do theatre?”

“Movie. Catherine’s gonna make me big,” Kimberly said. “And now for you... why are you listening at my door? You don’t live here, do you? I’ve never seen you before.”

“I... wasn’t eavesdropping. I was just passing by.”

“Are you here to visit someone?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

Bob swallowed. He feverishly tried to remember a name other than Jonathan Thorndike at the intercom panel, but to no avail. “I... there was no one there.”

“Who wasn’t there?”

Bob cursed himself inwardly. Why was he so nervous! His heroic attempt to save Kimberly Lloyd had left him completely confused. Why was he here? Because of Jonathan Thorndike!

"Well, to be honest... I wanted to see Mr Thorndike."

Kimberly Lloyd raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Jonathan? He's not here. What do you want with him?"

"It's a private matter," Bob replied, trying to play the embarrassed man—which he had no trouble doing. "Do you know where I can find him?"

"He's pretty busy at the moment but maybe I can help you."

"No, I'm afraid that's not possible. I have to speak to him in person. It's really very urgent."

"Is this about the movie?"

"About the... movie?"

"About the movie. At the moment, all the people want to talk to Jonathan about the movie. After all, it starts shooting the day after tomorrow."

"That means I'll probably find him at the studio?" asked Bob. He had actually thought his question was quite brilliant, after all, it almost forced Kimberly to reveal Jonathan Thorndike's whereabouts. But for some reason Kimberly's expression changed abruptly. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "At the studio? Tell me, what did you say your name was?"

"Robert," Bob said quickly, and that wasn't even a lie. "Robert... what?"

"Robert... Miller," Bob replied, hoping Kimberly hadn't noticed the tiny hesitation.

"Never heard of him. How do you know Jonathan?"

"It doesn't matter at all now," said Bob, who suddenly had the uneasy feeling that he had fallen into a trap. He headed for the door. "If he's not here, I'll come back later, okay?"

But before Bob could reach the door, Kimberly had already blocked his way. "I think you should stay a little longer, Robert. I don't believe a word you're saying."

With those words, she reached behind her, locked the apartment door and put the key in the pocket of her dressing gown. Then she pulled out a mobile phone and dialled a number.

"Hi Vince. It's Kimberly. Why don't you come over for a minute? There's a guy here who wants to cause trouble. I'll explain later. Hurry up! See you in a minute!"

With a sweet smile, she turned back to Bob. "Vince is my fitness trainer—an impressive presence. He'll get you talking!"

Pete's hand trembled slightly as he reached out for the handle. He closed his eyes and pushed it down. The door... remained closed. Pete sighed. He hadn't managed to pick the lock after all. And he had been so sure! Disappointed, he rattled the door—and suddenly it swung open. A gush of cold air rushed in. Behind it was absolute darkness.

For seconds, Pete and Jolene were speechless with surprise.

"It worked!" whispered Jolene.

"Yes." Pete cautiously stuck his head through the door.

For a tiny moment, he had held out hope that it would lead outside, to freedom, but the icy air dashed that hope. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, his fear was confirmed. There was a corridor in front of the door—a long, dark corridor with a rough concrete floor onto which fell a rectangle of light in which Pete's silhouette could be seen. The corridor ended after a few metres on the left at a windowless wall. On the right, it was darkness. He could see several closed steel doors lined up on both sides of the corridor.

Jolene now stuck her head out. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. Let's get out of here."

"Get out? But how—"

"The corridor must end somewhere. And there should be a way out too, we just have to find it." Pete took a step outside. "Come on, Jolene!"

Jolene hesitated for a moment, and then followed him.

Running down the dark corridor, past the white doors to the left and right, was like a vision from a nightmare in which one could run and run without ever reaching the destination. For a brief moment, Pete wondered if he might actually be dreaming. But then a noise snapped him back into reality.

"There was something!" whispered Jolene, who, like Pete, had stopped and was listening intently.

"Yes, I heard it too—a noise behind one of these doors."

"Maybe we'd better turn back after all!" Jolene whispered.

"No way!" Pete objected, having to pull himself together with all his might to sound cool and nonchalant. "That was probably Jupiter behind one of those doors. Jupe!" Pete's voice echoed endlessly and sounded so eerie that goosebumps ran down his spine. Seconds later, he heard an eerie, dull thumping.

"Someone's pounding on the door!" Jolene said.

"That could be him!" Pete said and started moving again.

It didn't take them long to find the door, behind which someone was still pounding. Pete dropped to his knees. The light was just enough to work the lock. After a minute, the Second Investigator had picked it. He rose and wrenched the door open.

In front of him stood a young woman, barely older than Pete, small and slender and shivering with cold. Frightened, she looked from Pete to Jolene and back again, obviously considering whether she was facing a friend or foe.

Pete didn't know who was more surprised—her or him.

"Who... who are you?" she stammered. "Where am I? How did I get here? I don't understand what's happening!"

8. Recruiting Members

The doorbell rang. Kimberly Lloyd's smile became a little sweeter and she pressed the buzzer.

Bob broke out in a sweat. He had to get out of here as fast as possible! Any second, this ominous Vince would show up here, and then it would be too late. But Kimberly Lloyd was still standing unmoved in front of him and didn't even think of clearing the way, let alone unlocking the door. Of course, Bob could try to escape by force. But if he ran straight into Vince's arms, it would be over. If, on the other hand, he remained calm, he still had a chance to talk his way out of it... maybe.

There was a knock.

Kimberly stepped backwards to the door, unlocked it and opened it without looking. "That was quick, Vince. Come on in. This fellow has been bothering me. I thought maybe you could teach him some manners."

"I'd like to do that. He deserves it... but my name is not Vince, it's Jelena... and I'm here to collect signatures."

Kimberly Lloyd turned around in surprise.

Jelena was unmoved as she continued: "As I'm sure it has not escaped your attention that the lift in this building is in a catastrophic condition. It is almost impossible for a wheelchair user to get in without help. The Association for the Physically Impaired Residents of West Hollywood, of which I am a board member, has made it its business to take action against these scandalous circumstances. You can become a member free of charge and in return, receive the association's quarterly newsletter. However, a small donation would help us. The elimination of life-shattering abuses for physically impaired residents in West Hollywood is everyone's business, including yours."

During her lecture, Jelena had hardly taken a breath. Instead, without asking, she had simply rolled into the apartment bit by bit, pushing the completely flabbergasted Kimberly further and further back until she was finally standing at the other end of the room, wedged between the balcony door and Jelena.

"Tell me, have you gone completely mad?" she uttered, slowly regaining her composure.

"Do I take it from your question that you are not interested in becoming a member?"

"Indeed! Now get out of here, you freak!"

"Okay. Bye." Jelena turned and hurriedly rolled out of the apartment.

Bob, of course, had taken the opportunity to disappear. He was waiting for Jelena in the corridor.

"Let's go!" he murmured, grabbing her wheelchair and running off.

"Hey! Stop right there!" shouted Kimberly, but Bob had already gone around the next corner and was heading for the lift. A glance at the display told him that the cabin was coming up.

"Vince!" murmured Bob. "He's coming up!" He looked around in panic. It wouldn't have been a problem to take the stairs, but with the wheelchair...

Jelena tore herself away and headed for a narrow door directly opposite the lift. She pushed it open. Behind it was a small, dark storeroom where brooms, buckets, vacuum

cleaners and cleaning stuff were kept. Without consideration, she pushed her wheelchair inside. A few brooms and buckets fell over, a bottle of floor cleaner tipped out of a shelf and missed her head by a hair's breadth. "Now come on!" she urged Bob.

Bob didn't need to be told twice. He jumped into the storeroom and took one last look at the display to see that the lift was already at that floor. He quickly closed the door and in an instant, darkness enveloped both of them.

With bated breath he listened.

The lift door slid open. Heavy footsteps stepped out into the corridor. Then Kimberly's voice sounded from far away: "Vince! Did you get them?"

"Get who?" boomed a loud bass.

"Well, that boy and his girlfriend in the wheelchair. They must have gone along the way you came!"

"I haven't seen anyone on the way up. What's going on anyway?"

"I don't know. There was this boy. Robert Miller is his name, supposedly. He wanted something from Jonathan. But there was something wrong with the lad. I think he was trying to spy on me."

"Spy? Do you think someone heard something?"

"I have no idea!"

"Where is Jonathan anyway?"

"I don't know! That's what worries me. The last time I spoke to him on the phone was this morning and he said that something had gone wrong and that he had to go to LASOMA urgently and I probably couldn't reach him because his mobile phone wouldn't work down there."

"Down there? What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know. I only spoke to him very briefly and he was in a terrible hurry."

"And what does he want in LASOMA?"

"I have no idea."

The voices slowly moved away. Bob dared to breathe again. Kimberly's voice could only be heard very softly: "But this fellow, this Robert... if you didn't see him, then he must still be here somewhere."

"Where?"

Kimberly remained silent... and Bob's heart sank into his shoes.

"If she's not completely stupid, she'll figure out where we are any minute!" murmured Jelena. "We have to get out!" She nudged Bob in the back of his knee. Bob lost his footing, stumbled forward and fell out of the storeroom into the corridor.

"There! Did you hear it?" shouted Kimberly. In a flash, Bob and Jelena could hear their footsteps approaching around the corner.

Bob scrambled to his feet, hammered on the lift button, and got behind Jelena's wheelchair. Luckily nobody called for the lift so it was still at that floor. However, it slid open infinitely slowly. They slipped into the cabin and Jelena pressed the button for the ground floor.

Kimberly and a two-metre tall guy, wide as a wardrobe and with forearms as thick as Bob's thighs, ran towards them. The sliding door didn't even think of closing. Then, when Vince had almost reached them, it did. He slammed his fist against the steel plate, but it was already too late.

"*Ciao, Vince!*" Bob shouted and the cabin started moving down.

The young woman's name was Leah. It had not been difficult to find that out. For everything else, Pete and Jolene needed considerably longer. Leah was secretive. After the relief of no longer being locked up, she had wanted to hear the whole story from Jolene and Pete before she said the first word about herself.

Unlike them, she had woken up in this cell half an hour ago all alone. The rest coincided disturbingly closely with Pete's and Jolene's experiences—Leah didn't know where she was or how she had got here. She had quickly become panicky. But now, in Pete and Jolene's company, she calmed down surprisingly quickly and soon radiated a cool composure that made a lasting impression on the Second Investigator.

"It's a very complicated story," Pete commented.

"You can say that again," Jolene agreed.

"What are you going to do now?" Leah asked.

"Jupiter must be somewhere nearby," Pete replied. "We have to find him and free him! With his help we'll get out of here, I'm sure of it."

Leah nodded. "Good. Let's go then!"

After the two young women had left the cell, Pete looked around again. Here it was just as bare and white as in their own prison. The cells were almost identical, except that there were no water pipes on the walls... and with that, there was no way to hide a camera.

"Are you coming?" asked Jolene.

Pete turned around and stepped back into the corridor. It was time he looked for the First Investigator.

For half an hour, there had been an icy silence. Jupiter walked up and down in their cold prison cell to distract himself from the chill, while Shawn had crawled back into his corner and watched the First Investigator incessantly.

Jupiter pretended not to notice, but Shawn's probing gaze from his dark eyes was disturbing. Jupiter could not concentrate. Shawn's very presence and silence completely threw him off. His sombre gaze seemed to suck all thought from Jupiter's brain.

Finally, frustrated and angry, he stopped and turned to Shawn: "What are you doing?"

"Do what?"

"Why are you staring at me?"

"I didn't stare."

"You're following me with your gaze. Do you think I didn't notice?"

"Where else am I supposed to look? There's nothing to see here."

"It makes me nervous. I can't think."

"You poor thing," Shawn remarked. "But in case you haven't noticed, thinking hasn't taken us one step further yet."

"Oh no?" cried Jupiter. "And what about Pete? And the camera?"

"Great, Jupiter, really great! And what good does it do us that your dubious buddy is also stuck down here somewhere? Nothing! We're still locked up. So stop making yourself important."

"Then you finally stop lying!" Jupiter hissed and bit his lip. He desperately searched for a way to soften what he had said or to steer it in another direction. But one look at Shawn's face made him realize that Shawn had already smelt a rat. He knew now that Jupiter didn't trust him. Worse still, he was now suspicious.

"What are you trying to say?" asked Shawn threateningly.

Jupiter had no choice but to try another approach. “You’re hiding something from me. I know it. There’s no point in denying it.”

“So I’m hiding something from you,” Shawn repeated calmly. “Are you going to tell me what it is and how you came up with that?”

“Gladly. You just said we are ‘stuck down here somewhere’—you said: ‘down here’. What makes you think we’re down anywhere?”

Shawn rolled his eyes. “Because there are no windows here, you super detective.”

“And what about the warehouse?” continued Jupiter, unperturbed. “Earlier you spoke of a warehouse. Do you also conclude that from the fact that there are no windows?”

“That was a guess, man!”

“A guess! Shawn, nobody would have thought of a warehouse just like that... and what was your problem with the camera?” Jupiter continued to probe.

“What are you talking about?”

“When I discovered the camera and took it down, you were not very enthusiastic. I would even go so far as to say that you would have preferred that I hadn’t found it. Can you make me believe that I’m delusional and just imagining things, or are you ready to finally tell me the truth?”

Shawn closed his face, looked at him expressionlessly and did not reveal the slightest bit of what was going on inside him. When he finally answered, his voice was also completely emotionless: “I don’t know what you’re talking about. A cold, bare cell without windows—this looks to me like an underground storage facility for, say, frozen food... or something else. Haven’t you noticed the smell of fish? Fish are put on ice after being caught and stored before or after further processing. We could be in a fish factory.”

Jupiter stifled an agreement. Shawn was right. This theory was indeed coherent, and he could have come up with it himself... but he hadn’t. “And what about the camera?”

Shawn smiled thinly. “Just because I’m not a busybody like you, who thinks he has to put all his findings into crafted words right away, doesn’t mean I have anything to hide. I just don’t care, you see. I don’t want to talk stupid and pretend that I can beam myself through this door just by talking. I just want to get out of here.”

“Then we have the same goal... and yet you put the brakes on every effort I make to free us. I—”

Shawn jumped up in a flash. The mask of indifference had crumbled to dust in an instant. Now his face was contorted with rage. “Now you listen to me! I’m getting tired of your chatter! It’s not doing us any good, you understand! So leave me alone with your silly theories! If you think you can get us out of here, then do it, instead of puffing yourself up! Otherwise, shut up! And don’t ever accuse me of having anything to do with that stupid camera or anything else! On the contrary, if I find out that you’re playing some kind of game and that you’re behind this, I’ll break you into small pieces. Understand?” While Shawn had been yelling at him, he had kept walking towards Jupiter. Now their faces were only a few centimetres apart. Jupiter felt his warm breath.

Suddenly, something clicked. The sound came from the door. Shawn and Jupiter turned their eyes towards it. The door swung open and a head stuck in.

“Hi! Well, Juve? Ready to go?”

9. Reunited

After Jupiter had found his voice, there was no stopping him. He and Pete talked incessantly to each other. Jolene, Shawn and Leah also introduced themselves and told each other what had happened. For minutes, Pete and Jupiter were so relieved to have found each other that they completely forgot about the situation they were in.

After a while, it was Shawn who interrupted the torrent of words. "It's great that we're all friends now, but can we just get out of here?"

Jupiter stifled a biting remark and nodded. "Shawn is right. We can deal with the question of how we got here later. For now, let's try to find a way out." He stepped out into the corridor and looked left and right into the darkness.

"How far have you gone?" he asked Pete in a whisper.

"Our prison cell is back there," the Second Investigator replied, pointing to the left. "And Leah's cell is there. What's on the other side, we don't know yet."

"Let's go then!" Shawn pushed past the two detectives and took the lead. Jupiter let him have his way without objection. Shawn had accused him often enough of making himself important. This was the opportunity to prove him wrong and that Jupiter was not interested in taking the lead now.

The light quickly fell behind them. Soon, the five were groping through bluish-cold darkness. With each step, the light grew dimmer until Shawn stopped and pressed a switch on the wall. A blue-white flash twitched through the darkness, and a moment later, a fluorescent light flared up on the ceiling... then a second... and like a twitching, buzzing wave, the light continued in both directions of the corridor, illuminating dirty-white concrete walls and dull steel doors from which the grey paint was peeling. Jupiter, Pete and Jolene paused in their movement like rabbits in the headlights.

"Turn it off!" murmured Pete.

"Why is that?" Shawn replied with a normal volume. "There's nothing here."

Leah also remained calm. "Do you want to hide in the dark? Hide from whom? There's no one here."

"But..." Pete fell silent. Of course the two of them were right. Nevertheless, the queasy feeling remained of suddenly being on display and at the mercy of an unknown power.

After five or six more doors, the corridor ended at a roller door made of scuffed aluminium. It was about three metres wide and was locked, as Pete noticed with a quick glance at the mechanism on the floor.

"Can you open this?" asked Shawn.

"I don't know much about roller doors. Besides, I don't have the right tools. But I can give it a try."

"What about the other doors?" Leah interjected. "Surely it's quite possible that there are more people down here... who maybe haven't woken up yet or don't dare draw attention to themselves?"

"You're right," Jupiter said. "It would be irresponsible to leave someone helpless. We should check all the other cells first before we attend to the roller door."

“Before I attend to the roller door,” Pete corrected, but then nodded and looked back down the corridor. “That must be twenty doors on each side. That’s going to take a while.”

The Second Investigator turned to the first door on the right and worked the lock. Soon he was successful. The cell behind it was no different from the three cells they already knew. Door by door, he now worked his way through the corridor, with Jupiter, Shawn, Jolene and Leah accompanying him and discussing their situation in more detail.

“We should use the time to ask ourselves why we are here at all,” Jupiter said. “I mean... why us of all people? There must be something common between us.”

“We’re all about the same age,” Jolene said. “Well, Pete and you are a few years younger... and we come from the same area but otherwise... We’ve already discussed what we do and what we remember... or don’t remember. I don’t see anything in common.”

“You really don’t?” asked Leah. “What are the last images in your memory?”

Jupiter, Shawn and Jolene shared their memories one after the other.

“It’s very similar for me,” Pete said. “I remember we were at the salvage yard. Your aunt wanted something from us, but I cannot remember what it was anymore. The memory... gets thinner and thinner, like you’re not quite sure if you dreamed of something or really experienced it.”

“Just like me,” Leah said. “I was in the car with my brother. We went shopping together. And then... it gets paler until finally there’s nothing left.”

“Nothing at all?” Jupiter enquired.

“Nothing at all. And you?”

Jupiter thought of the image of the axe-shaped island that had flashed through his mind. And there had been something else when he had woken up—a dream, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember what it had been about... or if it had meant anything at all. He shook his head. “No, nothing... but at least we can establish that amnesia sets in for all of us at about the same time—yesterday afternoon. So, I estimate that that was about twenty-four hours ago.”

“But how?” asked Jolene. “How can it be that five people lose their memory completely independently of each other and find themselves here? I mean, are we here because of the memory loss—or did we lose our memory because we are here? And how is that even possible that the memories suddenly stop?”

Jupiter sighed. “I have no proof, of course, but the longer I think about the phenomenon of our collective amnesia, the more certain I am that I have an explanation.”

“An explanation?” Jolene looked puzzled at the others.

Leah looked similarly tense as she did, while Shawn eyed the First Investigator suspiciously. “What kind of explanation?”

“The whole story reminds me of a case we were involved in once. We met some people who had also lost their memory. In the end, it turned out that they had been administered something—a liquid substance that robbed them of their memory.”

“Jupe!” cried Pete in horror. “Of course! At the Valley of Eagles! We and those people were being watched by cameras too!” And turning to Jolene, Leah and Shawn, he continued: “Back then, a couple of loonies with too much time on their hands and too much money thought it would be fun to place bets on how their subjects would react in certain situations. They were people from television. Jupe, do you think that... the same thing is happening to us right now?”

“I don’t think so, Pete. It wouldn’t make sense, because we are still in an absurd situation, although we discovered the cameras a while ago. Besides, there were cameras only in your cell and in ours. There are none in Leah’s or the other empty ones. None here in the

corridor either—I've already had a good look around. Don't ask me what that means, but one thing is for sure—this case is definitely different from that in the Valley of Eagles."

"And what happened to the victims there?" asked Leah tensely. "Did they regain their memory?"

"No. The period from which they lost their memory were irretrievably lost. Sometimes, they could very hazily recall bits and pieces of events, but they seemed more like a dream. I must admit, I too have the vague feeling that there are some dream images in my head, but I can't get at them. Just like sometimes when you wake up you know you've had a nightmare without being able to recall what exactly it was.

"Anyway, the only logical explanation for the situation we find ourselves in is that someone must have given us a very similar substance. It could be the same people who locked us in here."

For a while, there was thoughtful silence while Pete moved from the right to the left side of the corridor and now moved door by door back towards the roller door.

"All right," Jolene finally murmured. "So someone has fed us something. But who? And why? What's this all about?"

"What's this all about?" asked Shawn, who had been noticeably reticent so far. "I can tell you that, Jolene."

Without warning, Shawn grabbed the First Investigator by the collar, shoved him hard against the wall, and yelled: "That means that Jupiter is playing a very nasty game with us!"

10. LASOMA

Only when there was already a kilometre between the yellow Beetle and Richmond Road did Bob dare to breathe a sigh of relief and relax a little. Until the last second, he had thought Kimberly and Vince would give chase. But as dicey as the situation had been, Bob and Jelena had obviously not been important enough.

“You haven’t said anything yet,” Jelena broke the silence.

“About what?”

“About my performance. Wasn’t that great?”

“Yes, it was.” Bob smiled for the first time since their escape. “Thank you. How did you know I needed help?”

“I didn’t know. I just had the impression you were in that apartment far too long. So I just rang the bell.”

“Jelena, I was in there for five minutes at the most.”

“That’s what it was—too long.”

“What about the mad woman?”

She laughed. “She was yelling, but I didn’t give two hoots.”

Bob sighed. “In any case, you saved me. Vince could have been a real pain in the butt. The trouble is, I didn’t find out anything. Jonathan Thorndike has something to do with movies and is very busy at the moment... But whether and how Jupe and Pete fit into this story, I don’t know.”

“Still, this Thorndike is our only lead,” Jelena remarked. “What did Kimberly say to Vince about where Jonathan was?”

“At Lasoma, whatever that is,” Bob replied. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Lasoma?” Jelena repeated thoughtfully, and Bob almost expected her to pinch her lower lip at any moment. “That doesn’t sound like a name, more like an abbreviation. What could that stand for?”

Bob had a flash of inspiration. “‘LA’ could be ‘Los Angeles’.”

“Good idea! And the rest?”

Instead of thinking further about the rest of the abbreviation, Bob turned his gaze out of the side window and slowed down a little.

“What are you looking at?” Jelena asked.

“Someone who can help us.”

Three blocks down, Bob found what he was looking for. He slammed on the brakes, parked on the side of the road and got out. “Be right back!”

A travel agency with posters for sightseeing tours in the window had caught Bob’s attention. The lady at the counter didn’t know what to do with ‘Lasoma’ right away, but she had a lot of material on Los Angeles. After leafing through address books and long lists of organizations for a while, she found what Bob was looking for. Bob beamed, thanked her and returned excitedly to the car.

“L.A.S.O.M.A.!” he shouted as he got in his car. “Los Angeles School of Method Acting—an acting school!”

“Wow!” Jelena was impressed. “So this Thorndike really has something to do with movies? That fits. But what exactly does he want in an acting school? And what does all this have to do with a case?”

“We’ll figure that out. Let’s go to LASOMA!”

“Hey!” gasped Jupiter. “Are you crazy—”

“Shut up, Jupiter! As soon as you open your mouth, you’re lying!”

“Shawn!” pleaded Jolene. “Let him go!”

“What are you doing?” cried Leah angrily.

“Now spit it out, Jupiter! What’s going on?”

“I don’t know!” affirmed Jupiter.

“I don’t believe a word you say!”

Suddenly Shawn was grabbed and pulled around. Pete had rushed to his friend’s aid.

“Stop it!”

Shawn seemed to wrestle with himself for a moment as to whether he should attack Pete too, but then he probably realized that he stood no chance against both the athletic Second Investigator and Jupiter.

Breathing heavily, he took a few steps back and glared angrily at both of them in turn.

“You can’t fool me anything more! I know you’re both behind this!”

“But Shawn, that’s absolute nonsense!” Jupiter objected.

“I think so too, Shawn. Jupiter was just trying to—” Jolene began, but she was abruptly interrupted by Shawn.

“Jupiter has tried to serve us one fairy tale after another from the very beginning! Forgetting potion! Don’t make me laugh! It just so happens that our esteemed fellow prisoner Jupiter Jones is the only one who has ever heard of it, just as he happens to know Morse code. And his colleague here happens to know how to pick locks!” He turned to Jolene. “Notice anything, Jolene? They’re the only two people who knew each other before. These guys are pulling our legs. They know exactly what’s going on, and it’s a mind game.”

Then Shawn turned back to Juve, and continued: “I didn’t trust you from the start, Jupiter Jones. With your strange potion you have just exposed yourself once and for all.”

“Shawn, I’ve explained to you a thousand times—”

“I don’t believe a word you say anymore!”

“Calm down, Shawn,” Pete tried, but it was useless.

Shawn was seething with anger. “You know what? I would beat the truth out of you, but I know I don’t stand a chance against you two. From now on, you can do whatever you want. I’m not playing your game anymore.”

“But—” Pete began.

Shawn turned and left the group. He marched down the corridor in the direction leading away from the roller door. On reaching the wall, he sat down on the floor and stared darkly at the others.

“Tell me, is he crazy?” asked Pete.

Jupiter waved it off. “Let him be, Pete. In a way, I can even understand him. If someone behaved like that towards me, I would be sceptical too, but we can’t take that into consideration. Let’s just carry on as planned!”

Pete returned to his work. Ten minutes later, he had opened all the doors. Everywhere with the same result—the cells were cold, dark and empty. There were no more prisoners. Only the all-pervading smell of fish had become more penetrating.

The Second Investigator wrinkled his nose. "There must have been tons of fish stored here. It's disgusting!"

"Unfortunately, that knowledge doesn't get us anywhere," Jupiter replied and moved towards the roller door. "Let's get out of here."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" asked Leah.

"What do you mean?" Pete asked.

"Well, we don't know what awaits us behind the roller door. Here we are relatively safe. Behind there, however... anything could be waiting for us."

Jupiter shook his head with a smile. "Whatever is behind that door—it will bring us closer to the answers to our questions. Pete, get to work!"

But it was not that easy. No matter how hard Pete tried, he could not pick the lock with his makeshift tool. After a quarter of an hour, he gave up, exhausted. "Sorry, Jupe, but it won't work. This lock is just too complicated for two simple metal bars. We have to try something else."

"Something else?" asked Leah. "Are you wanting to break down the door? That'll never work."

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Why not, actually? If we were to use a lever..." He broke off, then his face suddenly brightened. "That's the idea! I've seen thin, sturdy heating pipes in a few cells! If we can somehow rip those out of the wall, then the lever idea might work! Come on, Pete!"

They hurried from cell to cell until they finally found a pipe that immediately gave way when Pete hung on to it with all his weight. Excitedly, they returned with it, pushed a third of it under the gap of the roller door and gripped the other end tightly with both hands.

"On my count, Pete, we lift up the pipe.... One, two, three!"

Pete and Jupiter lifted the pipe with all their might. Like top athletes trying to lift a weight, they braced themselves until their faces glowed with effort. Jupiter was about to give up, when suddenly the lock creaked. He mobilized the last of his strength to lift the pipe higher. There was a bursting sound and the roller door rattled upwards with a hellish noise. The noise echoed endlessly through the long corridor and back again, and it took four or five breaths for the echo to finally fade away.

The roller door was open.

11. The Direct Way

The Los Angeles School of Method Acting was located on the outskirts of West Hollywood on a hill from which one had a clear view of the famous white Hollywood sign. In connection with the acting school, it seemed like a promise.

Bob thought the building itself was awful. It looked clunky, narrow and angled and stood out with brown plastic cladding on the façade and tinted windows.

“Pretty,” Jelena judged wryly, moving towards the main entrance where there was a flurry of activities. Students were frantically running in and out, all carrying papers, instruments or sports bags, and a small group had gathered on a small green area nearby, practising breathing and singing scales.

Inside, it didn’t look any different. Even in the entrance hall, which was similarly badly coloured as the outside façade, there was hustle and bustle. And on small benches, tables and seating groups, drama students sat reciting quietly to themselves, quizzing each other or stretching and loosening their muscles for dance class. No one took any notice of Bob and Jelena.

“And now what?” asked Jelena.

Bob looked around indecisively and then headed for the notice board. It was a huge notice board with at least ten students standing in front of it. It occupied the entire length of the left wall and was littered with small and large, official and less official-looking, plain and brightly coloured pieces of paper. Here courses were announced, parties and private study groups, apartments and rooms were sought or offered, course places were exchanged and used books were sold.

Bob tried to get an overview. He had the absurd hope of discovering the name ‘Jonathan Thorndike’ somewhere in this forest of notes. But why should Thorndike have pinned something on the notice board here?

“What a bummer,” Bob growled. “We found LASOMA, but that doesn’t do us any good at all. Even if Jonathan Thorndike is here, we wouldn’t even recognize him! What are we going to do?”

He looked at Jelena. She was busy. She had simply torn off a large piece of paper. Now she was writing on the blank back with a pen. When Bob saw what she wrote, he almost panicked. It said:

Where is Jonathan Thorndike?

“Are you crazy?” he gasped.

“No. You?”

Bob looked around frantically and stood in front of Jelena so that no one could see the note if possible. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll solve the problem,” she replied calmly, without looking up from her work.

“Are you going to put the note up?” Bob asked.

“What do you think? That I’ll throw it in the rubbish bin when it’s done?”

“But you can’t do that!”

“What, throw it in the rubbish bin?”

“Hang it up! I mean... I mean...” Bob broke off. He suddenly realized that he didn’t know what he meant.

“Yes?” asked Jelena, grinning. “I can imagine what you mean, Bob. You think that as a detective you always have to sneak from A to B and be on guard all the time, and don’t want to be noticed, and don’t do anything obvious! But in this case, that is useless.”

“But what if this Thorndike is homicidal and flips out as soon as he sees the note?”

“Bob, if you have a better plan, go ahead,” Jelena said. “But I’m afraid we don’t have the time to try other things. Jupiter and Pete may be in danger! Believe me, the direct way is the best one here. So, help me put this note up!” She pressed the sheet into his hand.

Bob stared at it uncertainly. Then he gave a jerk, looked around, and waited until he felt no one was looking in his direction. Then he pinned up the note in a flash, covering three smaller notices. Hastily, he grabbed Jelena’s wheelchair and moved to a safe distance. Then he sat on a free bench and watched the notice board out of the corner of his eye.

“Now what?” he wondered.

“Now we’ll see if anyone responds to the note. Enough people are there. But for this purpose, we have to get a little closer.”

Jelena resolutely gripped the wheels of her wheelchair and looked for a position that was inconspicuous on the one hand, but from which they had a perfect view of the notice and could even hear what the people there were saying.

It didn’t take long before the first reactions came. Most students saw the note and smiled. Others shook their heads.

“I admit, I was hoping for a little more meaningful response,” Jelena murmured after five minutes.

Bob suppressed a grin. For the second time that day, he thought that Jelena was behaving exactly as Jupiter normally did. He preferred to keep that to himself, which was not difficult for him, because at that moment his attention was drawn to something else—a young couple had stopped in front of the note.

“Jonathan Thorndike?” a boy with shoulder-length hair and a goatee asked his girlfriend, whose face was half hidden behind a thick head of curls. “He was here this morning, wasn’t he? I wonder if that’s—”

That was all Bob heard, because Jelena was already moving towards them. “Hello, could I have a word with you?”

Behind the roller door was an enclosed area as wide as the corridor they were in. The light streaming in from the corridor was enough to see that it was completely empty apart from a wide, two-winged sliding door. The door was made of white painted metal and had two small windows with metal grilles set into the glass. The walls were grey, unpainted concrete and completely unadorned.

Pete did not know whether to be disappointed or not. This was not the freedom he had hoped for. On the other hand, there was this sliding door...

“A freight lift!” Jupiter interrupted Pete’s thoughts. “That’s a lift that you use to transport big things up and down. We are at a lift landing.”

“Fish,” Pete remarked, feeling that the smell had become even more intense after opening the roller door. “My guess is fish.”

“Fish or no fish, we’ll be out soon,” Jupiter said delightedly and headed straight for the door. There was darkness behind the panes. Jupiter pressed the lift button. Nothing moved.

The little light next to the switch remained dark. And no matter how hard Jupiter listened, no hum or rattle could be heard. He pressed the button a few more times, but it remained silent.

"The thing doesn't seem to work at all any more," he muttered.

"You don't say," Pete said bitterly. He rattled the door as a test. To his astonishment, it gave way with a rusty squeak. He quickly pulled it all the way open and looked into the dark lift shaft, which smelled of machine oil as well as fish. Going down, the shaft ended after about one and a half metres in a tangle of cables, wire ropes and wheels. Then Pete looked up. About five metres above him hung the lift cabin blocking the exit.

"Hmm... climbing up there wouldn't be a problem..."

"Climbing up?" Leah interrupted him. "Are you serious? You'll never make it!"

"No, I'm good at climbing... and it's not that high."

"But if you fall down, you'll land among all the cables and wires!" Leah exclaimed.

"It's not like I'm planning to fall."

"So brave today huh, Pete?" wondered Jupiter.

"I just want to get out of here, Juve. And if I'm looking at this right, there's an escape hatch up there. If I can get to it and open it, then we'll get out of here."

"Do you really think you can get that hatch open?" asked Jolene hopefully.

"I'll see when I get up there."

"I'm very curious about that!" said a haughty voice behind them. The four of them turned around. Shawn had appeared without anyone noticing. "Go ahead, Pete, climb up!"

Pete frowned. He didn't quite understand what Shawn wanted to tell him but he didn't care either. Determined, he reached into the shaft and checked the wire rope from which the counterweight for the lift hung. It was taut. The oil had made it a little slippery, but it would work for the few metres. He took momentum and pulled himself up.

Suddenly Leah climbed down into the shaft.

"What are you doing?" asked Jolene in surprise.

"If he can't be dissuaded from climbing, I at least want to make sure that nothing happens to him if he does fall. Together we can catch him!"

Jupiter followed her example immediately. "Good idea, Leah. It always lands softer on us than on the concrete."

A giggle sounded from above. "Yes, especially on you, Juve!" Pete's voice echoed down the shaft.

Jupiter felt himself blushing, but the others were kind enough to overlook the Second Investigator's remark.

Jolene climbed down as well and looked at Shawn, who was still standing on top, promptly. "Come down, Shawn! The more down here, the better!"

Jupiter didn't think that Shawn would let himself be persuaded, but he joined them without comment.

In the meantime, Pete had reached the top and looked down for the first time. "Pretty high, though!"

"What does it look like?" asked Jupiter. "Is there really a hatch?"

"Yes. But I don't know how to get it open. I would need another hand... Wait!" Pete tried to brace himself against the wall with his feet to get a secure grip.

Suddenly a loud humming sounded. A second later, the cabin started moving. There was only a tiny jerk, no longer than a blink, then it stopped again. But that moment was enough!

Pete was so frightened that he let go of the rope. His feet slipped, and he plunged into the depths!

12. Free Fall

The second he fell free seemed to him like slow motion, but at the same time frantic. He had no chance to react. The joke he had made about Jupiter's corpulence flashed through his mind, then suddenly something jerked his arm. The jerk was so strong that he spun in his fall. He saw Jupiter's horrified face racing towards him.

Pete threw the First Investigator smoothly off his feet. Their heads banged together unsteadily. For a brief moment, Pete was as if enveloped in fog. When he regained consciousness, Leah and Jolene were kneeling beside him, worried.

"Pete!" cried Jolene. "Are you all right?"

Difficult question, Pete thought, and just in case, he said: "Ouch!"

"Oh, goodness! You're bleeding!"

"I... what?" Pete turned to a more comfortable position and a hot pain shot through his right arm. Horrified, he looked at the tear on his forearm, about ten centimetres long, from which blood was slowly flowing.

He looked up. The sharp ends of a loose wire rope sticking out into the shaft had slashed his skin. The wound looked bad. Pete felt a little dizzy. "I'm all right," he claimed, glancing at Jupiter. "How about you?"

"You mean apart from the fact that you elbowed me in my stomach? And that I lost our little skull duel? I'm fine. But we should climb out of this shaft as soon as possible. Maybe the cabin will start moving again in a minute... and it's going down."

Three minutes later, they were leaning against the wall next to the lift shaft. Jupiter, Jolene and Leah anxiously examined Pete's arm. He was still bleeding. The Second Investigator had gone pale. With his left hand, he gripped his forearm tightly, as if he could control the pain through it.

"This doesn't look good at all," Jolene muttered.

"I told you it was too dangerous," Leah replied.

"It wouldn't have been dangerous at all if the cabin hadn't suddenly moved," Pete said. "Why did it move at all?"

"There is really only one logical explanation for this," Jupiter said and looked anxiously into the shaft.

"And what's that?" Pete wanted to know.

"There's someone up there. Someone had overheard us trying to escape and started the lift to scare us off—with success—because it's definitely too risky to try that way again."

"Well, what a coincidence," Shawn suddenly spoke up. He had been silent until now and had not even helped Pete out of the shaft.

"You stay out of this!" hissed Jupiter.

"Do you still think we're staging all this?" asked Pete angrily. "Do you think I slit my arm on purpose?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," Shawn replied and turned away demonstratively.

Pete forced himself to ignore him. "So you really think there's someone up there listening to us, Juve?"

The First Investigator nodded.

“But... but then we must try to make contact!”

“Make contact?” Jupiter laughed. “Whoever is up there has had a thousand chances to contact us. Believe me, Pete, we wouldn’t get an answer.”

“But... but we can’t just sit here while this guy...” Pete tried to get up, but when he moved his arm, the pain, which had flattened to a dull throb, came back with force.

“Hey!” Pete now shouted towards the shaft. “Hey, you! Let us out of here! That’s enough, understand? If you let us go now, I might still find the story kind of funny, but I’m really starting to lose patience!”

No answer came. No one had expected any.

“Now you listen to me!” Pete tried again, much more forcefully. “You’ll be in big trouble if we get out of here! Not only with me, but also with the police!”

“Pete,” Jupiter said soothingly. “Save your breath. It’s no use, believe me.”

“But... but we have to do something!”

The First Investigator nodded. “You’re right about that. I’ve been thinking about it all the time... but I can’t figure out anything yet.”

In a strange way, this sentence discouraged Pete more than anything else. If Jupiter hadn’t figure anything out, then the situation was really hopeless.

The First Investigator rose and wandered slowly up and down. After a short while, Jolene joined him. When the two of them were just out of earshot of Pete, Leah and Shawn, Jolene murmured: “We really have to do something, Jupiter! Pete’s wound is still bleeding. Not badly, but... it’s not going to stop easily either. We don’t have anything to bandage it. If we don’t get out of here soon, then...”

Jupiter nodded. The seriousness of the situation had not escaped him. He was already racking his brains as to how he could help his friend. Worried, he looked over at the Second Investigator. Pete had begun to tremble. Now that he was just sitting in the corner staring at his bleeding arm, the cold that was down here struck even more mercilessly.

“I know, Jolene,” Jupiter said. “But what are we going to do? The shaft is too dangerous. We can’t talk to those up there either. So what’s left?”

Jolene bit her lips. She seemed to be struggling with herself. She looked at Jupiter as if she wanted to say something, then looked away again. She opened her mouth but remained silent. Then she finally said it, quietly though, as Jupiter could barely understand her murmured words: “We could pull the emergency brake.”

“The emergency brake?”

“Yeah. You know...”

Jupiter frowned. He had no idea what Jolene was talking about. “No. What do you mean?”

Jolene looked around and moved a few more metres away from Leah and Pete. Barely audible, she murmured without looking at Jupiter: “We could stop the experiment. It’s no fun any more. I mean, Pete is hurt! He’s bleeding! I’m sure this wasn’t intended to happen.”

Jupiter felt as if he was in free fall. Suddenly there was only him, Jolene and three words echoing in his head—‘experiment’, ‘fun’, ‘intended’.

That could not be. Jupiter misunderstood something, yes, of course, that’s how it had to be—perhaps Jolene was making a joke or something.

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t intended to be,” Jupiter murmured cautiously. “But how are we supposed to stop the experiment?”

Jolene frowned and answered again in a lowered voice: “Well, by telling the person up there that it’s over now... that we have an injured person... that it was fun, but Pete really needs medical help. He’ll understand that, won’t he? I mean, this experiment can’t be that

important that he'd just let Pete bleed to death. Is his name really Pete? Or is that just his role name? What's wrong with you, Jupiter? Why are you looking so funny?"

The two drama students turned to Jelena and Bob.

"Could I speak to you for a moment?" repeated Jelena.

"What's up?" the boy asked.

"Do you know this Jonathan Thorndike?"

"Not personally, although he was supposedly here this morning. I missed it, unfortunately. Anyway, I guess he made quite a fuss."

"Quite a fuss?" Bob enquired. "In what way?"

"Well, he showed up and spontaneously asked around if anyone had time and wanted to do a movie project," the girl replied.

"A movie project?" Bob repeated.

"Yes," the girl continued. "Something experimental. He told us that two actors had dropped out and he needed replacements immediately. So of course everyone was on fire... but you're too late as the roles have been taken."

"No, no, that's not the point at all," Jelena waved it off. "We are interested in it for other reasons. Do you know anything more about the project? Have you talked to him?"

"Unfortunately not," the boy replied, "although I would have liked to. After all, Thorndike is not entirely unknown."

"Oh," said Bob. "He's not?"

"Are you saying you don't know him?"

"Um... well..."

"Thorndike is a director. Granted, he's not that famous, but he's made some great little movies."

Bob gave Jelena a meaningful look. That was finally some information, even if he did not yet know what it meant.

The boy turned to his girlfriend. "Your friend is in this, right?"

She nodded. "Jolene. She's actually just an acquaintance but she told me about it briefly. Thorndike needed someone who was good at acting improv. And that's for today, all day. She hardly knew anything about the project itself, though. It was very mysterious, the whole thing."

Jelena and Bob looked at each other frowning. They couldn't make any sense of this story at all. Jupiter and Pete had been chasing a director who wanted to stage an experimental movie? Bob had the feeling that he was looking at just the tip of the iceberg, but underneath was a whole other story that he had no idea about.

"Do you know where this project is going to take place?" he asked.

"Hmm..." The girl pondered. "Somewhere by the harbour, I think. In a warehouse or something."

"Which harbour?" Jelena enquired. "Which warehouse?"

"I think she said she had to go to Long Beach."

"Long Beach?" repeated Bob. "Long Beach harbour is huge!"

"I know. But it has to be there somewhere. Don't ask me where exactly. I have no idea."

"Stalkers," said the boy. "Stalkers Fish Factory—that's where she was going."

His girlfriend looked at him in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"She told me."

"She told you?"

“Yes.”

“But you don’t even know Jolene.”

“Of course I know her.”

She narrowed her eyes and hissed: “So you do!”

“What?”

“You’re seeing her in secret!”

The boy was completely flabbergasted. “I... what? No! No, you’ve misunderstood something! I—”

“Oh, stop it! You can’t fool me!”

“Ahem,” Jelena muttered, but no one paid any more attention to her. She and Bob seemed to have become invisible to the couple. Questioningly, Jelena looked at Bob and whispered: “Perhaps, we’d better go?”

Bob nodded. “We won’t be able to find out anymore from them anyway.” A little louder he said: “Thank you very much for your help!”

There was no reaction from the couple, which was no wonder because by now, they were shouting at each other at the top of their voices.

13. Thorndike's Project

"Role name?" Jupiter had intended to cleverly sound out Jolene without her noticing. On the spur of the moment, he decided to change tactics and threw all caution to the wind. "What are you talking about anyway?"

"Shh!" Jolene hissed. "I'm sure there are still cameras or microphones somewhere! We ___"

"Cameras?" Jupiter now called out extra loudly, so that Pete, Leah and Shawn looked over at them curiously. He no longer wanted to be alone with Jolene. He needed witnesses to the outrageous things she was saying.

"What's wrong with you!" Jolene said angrily, lowering her eyes as if she were talking to the floor.

"Jolene, I..." Jupiter swallowed. "Are you saying we're still being filmed?"

"Well, what do you think! Otherwise he would have got us out of here long ago!"

"Who's he?"

"Jonathan Thorndike! The director who runs the project!"

"Jolene." Jupiter struggled to compose himself. "What kind of project is this?"

"Tell me, are you completely crazy?" Jolene was furious, and was completely different from how she had been before. Even her voice sounded different as if she had suddenly changed into a new person. "Are you trying to ruin everything?"

"What kind of project?" Jupiter yelled so loudly that his voice echoed off the cold concrete walls for seconds.

Everyone looked over at him, startled. Jolene stared at him as if he had just revealed a tremendous truth.

"Are you serious? You... want to claim you don't know anything about the project?"

"Again, I am asking you—what project, Jolene?"

"The movie project."

"No. I don't know anything about a movie project."

"And you're not pulling my leg?"

Jupiter could hardly contain his anger. "Do I look like I am?"

Jolene swallowed. Then she turned. "Shawn! Shawn, I think we have a problem!"

Against all expectations, Shawn immediately started to move. Now Pete became so curious that, with Leah's help, he got up and joined the group.

"What's going on here?" Pete asked.

"I'd like to know that too," Jupiter said and looked alternately from Jolene to Shawn and back again.

Shawn, too, suddenly seemed quite different from usual. His eternally suspicious expression, which had always seemed set in stone, had disappeared. Now he looked really nice, which only threw Jupiter into even more confusion.

"We have to abort," Jolene said to Shawn. "Pete is too badly hurt, we can't keep doing this."

Shawn nodded. "That's exactly what I was thinking."

"Abort what?" Pete asked.

Jolene and Shawn exchanged worried glances.

“Are you saying you don’t know what’s going on?” asked Shawn incredulously.

“That’s what he claims, anyway,” Jolene answered for Jupiter.

“I’m not just claiming it. I don’t know anything about a project! And neither does Pete!”

“Leah?” asked Jolene.

Leah nodded silently. “I know.”

“Well, at least that’s something,” Jolene remarked.

“Now tell me what’s going on here!” demanded Pete angrily.

“What’s going on?” asked Shawn. “We’re in the middle of a movie, that’s what’s going on.”

“In a movie?” Pete shouted. “Are you crazy? Like on the holodeck of the Enterprise or something? Everything around me isn’t real?”

“Yes, of course it is real,” Shawn said. “But it’s not us... Jolene and I—we’re actors... aspiring ones, anyway. Uh... I wasn’t sure about Leah because we haven’t met before.” He looked at her questioningly.

Leah nodded again. “I’m in my second year at drama school.”

“Actors? That... that means you haven’t lost your memory at all? And you know where we are and who brought us here?” Pete continued to ask.

“So it is. But I see from your amazement that you do not—”

“You’re damn right we’re amazed!” shouted Pete angrily. “We’re not actors! We’re real!”

“And unlike you, we actually don’t know how we got here,” Jupiter added.

Slowly, the fog around him began to clear. He was still confused beyond measure, but he felt himself regaining control of his thinking apparatus. He slowly realized what kind of situation he was actually in. Now he just had to figure out how he got into it.

“Listen, we had no idea that you two weren’t part of the team,” Jolene said. “We thought you were just playing your parts too... otherwise, of course, we would have—”

“Jolene,” Jupiter said, “how about you tell us the story from the beginning? And in the right order?”

Jolene nodded. “Okay. So Shawn and I are acting students at the Los Angeles School of Method Acting. This morning, Jonathan Thorndike came to the school desperately looking for two actors for a project that was supposed to start immediately and last twenty-four hours. The reason is that he had two people drop out.”

“Who is Jonathan Thorndike?” Pete asked.

“A director,” Jolene continued. “He told us that he wanted to make a movie in which the actors would be exposed to a situation that was completely unknown to them beforehand. Thorndike said there was already a location and everything, and the movie would be set in a locked building with cameras installed everywhere so that the actors would be completely alone with themselves and no cameramen would disturb the play.”

“Thorndike just gave us a stage direction,” Shawn took over. “We were to pretend that we had lost our memory and couldn’t remember what we had done in the last twenty-four hours and how we got to this place. He wanted to leave everything else to chance and our own interaction. We could work out for ourselves the role we wanted to play—whether we were calmer or quick-tempered, more fearful or courageous—that was all our decision. Only one thing was important to him—we should never leave our role!”

Leah nodded. “That’s what he kept saying. He said that as the experiment progressed, we would meet other actors who were also playing people with memory loss, but no matter what, we should always remember that it’s just a movie and by all means keep playing.”

“He was interested in the interaction between actors who had never seen each other before and who might not coordinate,” Shawn continued. “Then from the collection of footages, if it was usable, he wanted to edit a movie together. It was a bit like *The Blair Witch Project*, you know? The director just sent his actors into the forest with a video camera without them knowing what to expect. I found that incredibly exciting and immediately agreed.”

“It was the same for me,” Leah said. “except that I knew about the project a few days ago though—together with the two that dropped out. That was why Mr Thorndike put me in the single cell. He wanted to give you time to familiarize yourselves with the situation.”

“So you... you thought all this time that Jupiter and I were actors too, just pretending we had no idea what was happening to us?” asked Pete incredulously.

Jolene nodded. “That’s how it was. After all, that’s what Mr Thorndike had told us. I panicked when you suddenly discovered the video camera and smashed it right away! I didn’t know what you were doing because that was the movie camera! But then I remembered Thorndike’s words that we shouldn’t interrupt the game under any circumstances. So I thought that maybe the discovery of the cameras was intentional and part of the movie... and that there were other cameras that were better hidden that continued to film us.”

“I felt the same way,” Shawn said. “But I decided not to let it show.”

“That explains your strange behaviour after I discovered the camera,” Jupiter said. “But why have you been working against me all this time instead of helping me?”

“That was all part of my role. I had thought beforehand that I would play someone who is suspicious of everything and everyone and doesn’t believe anything I was told... and I went through with it. In every situation. I didn’t know that you were not acting it out.”

Jupiter shook his head in bewilderment. “It’s unbelievable. Neither Pete nor I have ever heard of this Jonathan Thorndike! Whatever he had already told you, I believe that he is still keeping something very important from all of us.”

14. The Traitor

It took Bob and Jelena almost an hour via the freeway to reach Long Beach Harbour. The sun was already low in the sky and bathed the harbour in a golden glow. The air smelled of oil, salt and fish. A constant rattling of tankers, boats and cutters and the screeching of countless seagulls wafted over to them from the sea.

Unlike the harbour at Rocky Beach, Long Beach Harbour was a veritable monster stretching across an island, several peninsulas and a confusing system of canals and docks the size of a borough. Cranes towered over flat warehouses, and beyond the main streets, the paths were lined with large and small steel containers.

In some places, Bob was no longer sure whether he was still on a public road or on a company site. The further they drove into the port area, the more they lost their orientation. They crossed small and large bridges and car parks, drove past piers and jetties, their eyes constantly turned to the left and right, hoping to spot a sign somewhere that said 'Stalkers'. But after twenty minutes, Bob had to admit to himself that he was hopelessly lost. He stopped.

"What are you doing?"

"There's no point, Jelena. We have no idea at all where we are. The harbour is huge! How are we ever going to find this fish factory?"

"Certainly not by stopping here," Jelena grumbled.

"No, but..." Bob broke off, stepped on the accelerator again and drove a few metres further. He had spotted a dock worker who had just got out of his truck. "Excuse me!" he called out of the open window. "Do you happen to know where 'Stalkers Fish Factory' is?"

The moustachioed man in the blue overalls seemed to consider for a moment whether he should react at all or just keep walking. Finally, however, he stopped, turned to Bob and grumpily growled something that Bob did not understand.

"Excuse me?"

Now the man said nothing at all, but pointed down the street with his gloved hand.

"That way?" Bob tried to translate the gesture.

The man nodded.

"And then?"

He made the same gesture again, more specific this time.

"Just straight ahead?"

Another nod.

"And then I find the factory?"

The third nod came, and the man continued on his way.

Bob looked at Jelena with raised eyebrows. "Nice man."

Bob could hardly believe it, but three minutes later, they had actually found the fish factory. Now that he saw the red and white logo of 'Stalkers' on a huge, very new-looking sign in front of him, he could remember having eaten the canned fish of this company sometime ago.

"Here we are," Bob said as he parked in the shade of a freight container, a little way away from the fence that enclosed the factory premises.

“It doesn’t look like a movie is being shot here,” Jelena said as they watched the trucks and forklifts driving around the site.

“No,” Bob agreed. “But I bet this Jonathan Thorndike is either in there or at least someone can tell us where to find him. I’m going to look around inconspicuously.”

Jelena eyed him from top to bottom. “Look around inconspicuously? Honestly, I doubt you won’t stand out in those clothes. Look, the people walking around are either wearing blue overalls or white coats.”

Bob pursed his lips. “You’re right about that, though... Wait! I have an idea!” He got out, opened the boot and pulled out something he had owned since he bought the car—a brand-new blue jumpsuit. “I bought this once in case I had to fix something on the car. It’s never happened before, though, because if something’s broken, Pete fixes it.” He grinned and pulled the overalls on.

“Really chic,” Jelena said, giving a thumbs up. “The perfect cover.”

“If I’m not back in fifteen minutes—”

“I’ll go save you again,” Jelena finished the sentence. “One of my easiest exercises. Be careful!”

Bob nodded at her, then walked in a wide arc towards the fish factory. It consisted essentially of a large hall, a car park where private cars and company trucks were parked, and a dock for large fishing boats. Behind the hall, a grassy hill with a high wire mesh fence separated the site from the neighbouring property. Bob decided to approach from this side.

The yard was bustling with activity. Countless workers were driving forklifts back and forth between fishing boats, trucks and the factory building, and at least as many were busy walking around.

Bob marched into the compound as naturally as possible and walked purposefully to the back of the hall so that everyone would think that he had something urgent to do there. No one took any notice of him anyway.

Finally, he stood in front of a row of steel containers lying close together in the shadow of the hall. It was the perfect cover. Bob ducked behind them to take a closer look at his surroundings.

There was not much to see. Some workers walked by, but they were too far away to notice him. There was a steel door leading into the hall. It was a simple door, not a gate for forklifts or containers. Every few minutes, someone would go in or come out. Here he could take a chance.

But what then? Jelena was right. Definitely, there was no movie being shot here. What would a director have to do here? This was just a normal fish factory.

Bob thought and tried to put all the information he had into a meaningful context. There was something Kimberly had said to Vince that now came back to Bob. She couldn’t talk to Jonathan Thorndike on the phone because his mobile phone wouldn’t work ‘down there’. She said ‘down there’.

“He’s underground somewhere!” Bob muttered. “In a basement!” Of course! Why shouldn’t this factory have a basement? That was what Bob had to look for!

He waited for a moment when no one was around, left his cover and ran towards the back entrance of the factory. He took another deep breath. Then he opened the door.

Jupiter looked around. For at least the tenth time, his gaze slid over the walls, the ceiling, the floor. He stared with narrowed eyes into the dark corners of the lift landing, examined the lift door and the roller door. There was nothing.

After Jolene, Shawn and Leah had revealed the truth, Jupiter had searched all over the place without finding what needed to be here if the story the three had told was really true. There was only one place he hadn't looked yet—the lift shaft.

Unnoticed by the others, he crouched down and climbed into the lift shaft. Fearfully, he looked towards the lift cabin that hovered five metres above him. If it started moving again, he had only a few seconds to get to safety before it crushed him. On the other hand, as long as he was quiet, only if there was indeed a hidden camera would anyone notice his presence in the shaft.

He turned his attention to the walls and the floor. There were not many possibilities to hide something, and so he was not surprised that he could not find a camera. But he discovered something else—near the floor, a small switch panel was mounted on the wall, almost disappearing in a tangle of cables. There were four toggle switches—the first three were pointed down, but the fourth was pointed up. Jupiter frowned. Without knowing the first thing about lifts and their power supply, he was still surprised that not all the switches pointed in the same direction. The First Investigator did not think twice and flipped the fourth switch down.

With a metallic squeak and rumble, the cabin above him began to move. For a heartbeat, Jupiter was so horrified to see the monster cabin sliding towards him that he froze completely. Then he flicked the fourth switch up. The cabin came to a grinding halt.

Within seconds, everyone was standing at the edge of the shaft, looking at Jupiter in shock.

“What happened?” cried Jolene. “What are you doing down there?”

“I'm... uh... investigating.”

“Come out of there, or do you want to be crushed!” Jolene frantically held out her hand to him and Jupiter gratefully allowed himself to be pulled out of the shaft.

“The lift cabin has moved again,” he explained.

“We heard that,” Shawn replied. “Why are you so reckless to go down there again?”

“I was looking for something.”

“What?” Leah wanted to know.

“A camera.”

“Well?” Leah asked.

“There isn't one, nor anywhere else down here. I've really searched everything.”

Pete frowned. “But that means—”

“—That we are unobserved since we destroyed the cameras in our prison cells,” Jupe said. “That Jonathan Thorndike up there may not have realized that he can no longer watch us and that his project is finished. The all-important question is—why didn't he get us out of here then?”

Jupiter threw a challenging look around. “Well, does anyone have any ideas?”

“Why are you asking us that?” Leah wanted to know.

“Because you know this Thorndike!” shouted Jupiter angrily. “You were in on it from the beginning, unlike Pete and me! Is it possible that there might be more to the whole story?”

“What do you mean?” Leah asked.

“I don't know.” Jupiter narrowed his eyes angrily and looked sharply at Leah, Shawn and Jolene in turn. “But one of you knows.”

“Excuse me?” asked Jolene.

Pete had no idea what Jupiter was talking about either. “Jupe, what—”

“I didn't find a camera down there, but I found something else,” Jupiter replied angrily.

“A switch! I set the lift cabin in motion and made it stop again!”

For seconds no one spoke a word.

“But...” the Second Investigator finally began, “but that means that the lift works!”

“It means a lot more than that, Pete,” Jupe explained. “Just before you fell off, the switch was manipulated from down here in the shaft, not from up there... and that means...” He paused for effect, looking slowly from Shawn to Jolene to Leah and back again. “That it must have been one of you three.”

Bob’s heart was pounding when he opened the back door to the main hall of the fish factory. The pungent smell of fish hit him and took his breath away for a moment. The hall was cool and bathed in bright fluorescent light. Nevertheless, it stank as if the delivered fish was lying in the blazing sun.

Bob quickly got an overview. He was in the back of the hall, where an overwhelmingly large and incredibly loud line of machines was running at full speed to process the fresh fish as quickly as possible. Dozens of workers stood at assembly lines or drove small cargo vehicles around the hall. Some of them were not much older than Bob, probably schoolchildren or students who were earning extra money at the factory. No one paid any attention to Bob. His camouflage suit worked perfectly.

Bob had to find access to the basement—a ramp, a staircase or a lift. He marched through the factory hall. After crossing it halfway, he spotted the white double door of a freight lift on the left. It was closed and no one was around to use it anytime soon. Heart pounding, he approached the lift, mustered all his courage and groped for the big yellow button that would call the cabin.

But he did not get that far. For suddenly someone behind him called out: “Hey! What are you doing here?”

“One of us?” Shawn repeated tonelessly after Jupiter had spoken his suspicions aloud.

“You’re not serious, are you?”

“I have no proof, but the fact is that we all looked up when Pete was climbing up to the lift cabin. Nobody was paying attention to what the others were doing. One of us could easily have flicked the switch for half a second. And that suggests that one of us is a traitor who can also answer the other questions: Why can’t Pete and I remember anything? How does that fit in with this movie project? Why hasn’t Thorndike got us out of here yet?”

“So there is a traitor,” Shawn said. “I agree with you that far because something is not right here... but who says it has to be one of the three of us? Why can’t you be the one leading us around by the nose?”

“You don’t have to play the suspicious one anymore, Shawn, that was just part of your role, remember?” Jupe said.

“It’s not a game this time, Mr Smarty Pants,” Shawn replied. “I have no more idea what’s going on than you do, and I still have many reasons not to trust you.”

“Calm down, guys,” Leah said. “There’s no point in throwing accusations at each other. Jupiter and Shawn are definitely right—something is fishy here, and that’s why I’m in favour of us working together to figure out who’s playing a false game and why. We shouldn’t take any further steps until we find out who the traitor is.” She looked around the rest of them.

Jolene, Shawn and Pete nodded in agreement.

Jupiter shook his head. “No, Leah! That’s exactly what we’re not going to do!”

“What do you mean?” Leah asked.

“Don’t you understand? We can tell each other what we want, we’ll never find out who’s telling the truth and who’s lying, because there’s just no common ground. I have lost my memory, Pete too, you three have not. That means that you can sell me anything, I have no way of verifying what you say.”

“If your memory loss story is even true,” Leah interjected.

“You see, that’s what I’m talking about,” Jupiter continued. “We’re going around in circles. We can argue for hours and hours, it’s not going to get us anywhere. So now I’m going to get this lift cabin moving and hope it gets us upstairs.”

“So you can get your head out of the noose?” Leah cried.

“Leah!” shouted Jupiter angrily. “Don’t you see what’s happening here? We’re not making any progress! If we had worked together from the beginning, we would have escaped long ago! But something kept coming up! And now you also want to talk everything out before we make another escape attempt! As important as deciphering this mystery is to me—it won’t stop me from getting out of here! I’m going to get the lift now.”

Jupiter did not give the others a chance to object or prevent him from doing what he wanted to do. More skilfully than he would have thought himself capable of, he climbed into the shaft, bent down to the switch panel, took another deep breath and flipped the fourth switch down.

Bob winced as soon as he heard someone yelled behind him. He closed his eyes. Now it was all over. He had been discovered even before he had entered the cold storage rooms under the warehouse! What was he to do now? How could he talk his way out of it? What—

“You’re supposed to be stacking the pallets, not folding boxes!”

Bob frowned and turned around. A tall, broad-shouldered man in a white coat had walked past directly behind him towards a boy who had probably ended up in the wrong department.

“Excuse me, sir, I thought—” the boy said.

“I don’t care what you thought,” the man growled. “Come on, back to the pallets!”

The boy hurried to get out of his boss’s sight. And Bob, whose heart was now beating like a jack hammer, hurried to press the button. There was a humming sound. Bob waited restlessly on his toes for a while, then pressed the button again. Why didn’t that darn lift come? Why was it so slow? Bob tapped impatiently at the double door—and it suddenly swung open.

He looked back over his shoulder one last time, then slipped into the spacious cabin, closed the door and pressed the button for the basement.

The freight lift started moving down. Jupiter jumped up in a flash, grabbed Jolene’s helping hand and wriggled out of the shaft. The lift slid down, rattling and humming, and already the cabin came into view. When it reached the landing, the cabin’s door slid open.

Jupiter froze. The cabin was not empty. Someone was in it.

15. In the Wrong Movie

The man was younger than Jupiter had expected. He looked a little like Shawn—tall, slim, athletic, a little daring. The only difference was that everything about him was light—his tousled hair was blond, his skin almost unnaturally pale, his eyes bright green. He wore a white T-shirt, and light-coloured jeans.

Jupiter stared at him and for a split second everything was back—a warehouse, a spotlight, a brown, axe-shaped island in a white sea. There was an important message on a note that Jupiter had hidden... somewhere nearby. All of this flashed through his head in lightning-like memory fragments—and disappeared again. What remained was the unpleasant feeling of having almost remembered something.

Desperately, Jupiter tried to force the images into a meaningful context before they sank back into his subconscious, but by then it was too late. The young man slowly stepped out of the lift cabin. He smiled at them and said in a soft voice:

“A very good day to you, Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw. Remember me?”

After the freight lift came to a halt and the door slid open, Bob found himself in a long, brightly lit and, above all, freezing cold corridor. To the left and right were a handful of doors, their dull steel surfaces freezing cold.

Bob shivered, and instantly his hopes vanished. It was so icy that no one would voluntarily be here any longer than necessary. He would be very surprised to find anyone here. Nevertheless, he had to look for a lead.

Bob stepped towards the nearest door and tried to open it, which was not easy, as there was neither a knob nor a handle, but a lever like the ones he knew from old-fashioned refrigerators. But finally it swung open with a hiss, and a gush of even colder air came towards him in white clouds. With the opening of the door, lights automatically flickered on inside the refrigerator.

Fish—freshly caught fish was stored in a bed of ice in polystyrene containers the size of laundry baskets, hundreds of which were stored in steel shelves that reached up to the ceiling. Even though it was so cold, the stench was pitiful.

Despite its size, the storage room was very clear. Bob realized at a glance that there was only fish here and no prisoners. He quickly closed the door again and hurried to the next one. One by one, he entered each room without encountering a single person—neither a factory worker nor Jupiter or Pete.

After five minutes, when he was standing in front of the last room, he was so cold that his ears, nose and fingertips were already numb. Only with difficulty was he able to operate the door lever. When he opened the door, a man in white overalls with a hood was standing in front of him, busy writing something down on his clipboard. He looked up in surprise.

“Yes?” the man asked, irritated. “What are you doing here?”

“I... uh... I’m looking for someone.”

“You’re looking for someone? Well, then you can only mean me, because there’s no one down here but me.” The man smiled.

“No, I—” Bob didn’t know what to say. He thought of Jelena, of how she had told him that sometimes the direct way was the best. This man didn’t look like he was up to anything. It looked like he was checking the quality of the fish, nothing more. Bob threw all caution to the wind.

“I’m looking for Jonathan Thorndike. Is that you by any chance?”

“Thorndike? Never heard of him.”

“Are there... are there other cells here? Where no fish is stored?”

The man laughed. “What else would be stored here? We’re in a fish factory here, boy!”

Bob thought it was possible, of course, that his conclusion was completely wrong... that Kimberly’s remark about mobile phone reception had absolutely nothing to do with underground locations. But either way, he had to find some lead!

The man probably felt he had to say something else, because Bob did not answer. “But you’re right, of course,” the man said. “Strictly speaking, there could be storerooms for pallets and empty boxes, as was the case in the old factory, but because of the more powerful refrigeration units in this new factory, nobody wants to stay down here any longer than necessary.”

“In the old factory?” Bob asked. “What old factory?”

“Well, the one at Dock Fifteen. You haven’t been working at Stalkers long, have you? The company only moved here three months ago.”

“And... and before that it was at Dock Fifteen?” Bob asked excitedly.

“Exactly. But the building was too small and the cold rooms not cold enough, so—”

“What happened to the old factory?”

The man shrugged, obviously irritated by Bob’s sudden interest. “It’s empty, I think. That is, wait a minute, I think a movie company has rented it for a few weeks to shoot something. Why—”

“Thank you!” Bob turned on his heel and stormed back to the freight lift.

The young man approached Jupiter and Pete with a smile. He knew their names! He knew who they were! Jupiter, on the other hand, still had no clue, and one look at Pete’s face told him that the Second Investigator was no different.

But before he could answer the question of whether he remembered, Jolene called out: “Mr Thorndike! At last! I was beginning to think you were going to leave us down here forever! Pete’s hurt. He needs to see a doctor.”

“It’s alright, Jolene,” murmured Pete, who was far too curious and had completely forgotten about his aching arm.

“You are Jonathan Thorndike?” asked Jupiter.

The man nodded. “So you do remember?”

“No, but Leah, Jolene and Shawn have told us about you,” Jupe said. “It was not quite a complete story, it seems to me.”

Thorndike nodded apologetically. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you have many questions. I... have some explaining to do.”

“I think so too, though.” Jupiter crossed his arms and waited.

“First of all, you were never in danger, you have to believe me. Pete’s fall was an accident that should not have happened, I admit that. But nevertheless—”

“Nevertheless, you have locked us up here against our will!” shouted Pete angrily. He could not understand how this Thorndike could stand in front of them smiling benignly and apologizing mildly!

But Jonathan Thorndike shook his head. “You’re wrong, Pete, and I’d like to explain it to you.”

“I beg to differ,” growled the Second Investigator, firmly resolved not to believe a word Thorndike said.

“It’s like this...” Thorndike began. “I’m a director and I’m working on a movie for a big Hollywood studio. We rented this abandoned factory building for the shooting. But the start of shooting was delayed by a few days. So I came up with the idea of using this time to realize an idea that has been on my mind for a long time using the space and equipment at my disposal.

“It is an experimental movie—five people wake up in different empty cells and can’t remember how they got there. The others have already explained the concept to you.”

“How do you know that?” asked Jupiter, lurking.

“Because I overheard you. The lift shaft has first-class acoustics. You could hear every word from the cabin. I developed the movie idea together with a few colleagues whom I originally wanted to use as actors. But I wasn’t quite satisfied with my concept yet. I wanted the actors to act really convincingly as if they had absolutely no idea what was happening around them. So I threw everything out at the last minute and I hired new, fresh actors from the drama school—Shawn, Jolene and Leah, whom I gave as little information as possible beforehand. I just told them the basic idea so they could act down here as spontaneously and true to life as possible.”

“Fair enough,” Pete said impatiently. “But Jupiter and I are not actors, or have I forgotten that too? How do you explain that to us?”

Jonathan’s permanent smile turned into a radiance. “That was the greatest idea I ever had! It came to me just a few days ago. I was thinking that the only way I could pull off a completely realistic scenario was to have people in the group who knew even less—who know nothing at all, not even that they are in a movie. I would have preferred to use only such people, but that would have been too dangerous. There had to be some actors who knew that it was all just a game otherwise, panic could have broken out among the participants in the experiment.”

“A panic has definitely broken out!” cried Pete angrily. “At least with me! Experiment, my foot! You dragged us here against our will and fed us who-knows-what to make us forget everything!”

Gently, Jonathan shook his head. “Not against your will, Pete.” And with that he pulled two folded pieces of paper out of his pocket and handed one to Jupiter, and the other to Pete.

Angrily, the Second Investigator unfolded it and read the printed text... and with every word, his anger turned more and more into disbelief and amazement. The text said:

I, Pete Crenshaw, in full possession of my faculties, hereby declare myself willing, absolutely voluntarily and on my own responsibility, to participate in the movie project Trail to Nowhere by Jonathan Thorndike.

For this purpose, I will also voluntarily and on my own responsibility take a chemical substance that will erase my memory of the last twenty-four hours. The substance is completely harmless. Studies have shown that no significant side effects or long-term damage are to be expected. I will almost certainly not remember agreeing to this project later and I accept this fact.

Furthermore, I have no say and cannot be involved in the realization of the movie material, but I can decide whether I want my name to be mentioned in the credits. For my participation in this project, I will receive a copy of the finished movie.

(signed)
Pete Crenshaw

16. The Brown Axe

Bob was completely out of breath when he reached his car. Jelena looked at him worriedly through the open window. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Correct company... wrong factory!" gasped Bob, dropping exhausted into the driver's seat. "That's the... wrong factory there! There's another... another one—one that is empty."

"Well, let's go then!" urged Jelena.

Bob nodded. "That's what we'll do."

But he didn't get to turn the ignition key, because suddenly a black shadow slid into his field of vision. He turned his head. A man was standing next to the driver's door. He was tall, half bald and wearing a black coat despite the warm weather. He stared steadfastly at Bob, then knocked on the window.

Bob had no idea who this man was. For a moment, he considered just driving off and leaving him there. But it was probably just a harmless passer-by asking for directions. Bob rolled down the window.

"Good afternoon. You're Bob Andrews, aren't you?" the man asked, leaning down to him.

"I... uh... yes."

"Am I glad to meet you! What happened? Did something go wrong? Where is Jonathan?"

Bob shook his head in confusion. "Excuse me, who are you anyway?"

The man frowned, then laughed. "That's right, we've never met. My name is Boyd... William Boyd."

Pete stared at the signature, which was undoubtedly his. Then he looked over at Jupiter, who was holding an identical document in his hands with his name and signature.

The First Investigator had already read everything twice and looked just as incredulously at Pete. "This... this is my signature!"

"Of course it's your signature!" laughed Thorndike. "You couldn't wait to sign it yesterday!"

"But... but if all this is really true... how did you find us?"

"You came to me," Thorndike replied. "I had put an ad in the paper which said: 'Looking for young people for a short-term movie project.' In response, you guys called me yesterday. I explained to you that you had to sacrifice twenty-four hours for this project and that it had to be the very next day. The joke was that you must not even remember reading this advertisement and calling me. The substance that erases your memory only works for the last twenty-four hours. We met, I explained the details, and you were thrilled!"

"Thrilled?" Pete shook his head. "I can hardly imagine that."

"I do," Jupiter murmured softly.

"Indeed, Jupiter," Jonathan said and smiled again. "You were on fire. You spoke of a great challenge and were of the opinion that you would find out the secret despite your loss of memory. You were so convinced that even without memory, you would be able to solve the mystery of how you got here. You were very determined to take part. Time was pressing, so you finally persuaded Pete."

"The next day, that's today, we met here in the warehouse and you signed these papers. I gave you the drug, which made you very tired in the first hour after taking it, and you lay down in the cell to sleep. Then later I brought in Jolene, Shawn and Leah, whom of course I couldn't engage until the last second, not knowing when someone would respond to my ad and actually commit to this experiment. They didn't know that you two weren't actors.

"Shawn pretended to be asleep and waited for you to wake up, while Jolene just woke Pete up at some point. By the time you were both awake, you couldn't remember what happened earlier."

"And... and Leah?" asked Jupiter mechanically, although he wasn't sure he had processed all the information yet. "Why wasn't she there from the beginning?"

"I wanted to bring Leah in later to make the movie more interesting," Jonathan explained. "You know, it wasn't planned at all for you to break free. That was going to be Leah's job. She was the only one who knew a bit more about the project than the others... but you turned the tables. That's good too, as it made it more exciting for me as a director."

"That means you were sitting somewhere upstairs watching us the whole time with the help of the cameras," Jupiter said.

"Exactly. Of course, it wasn't difficult for me to get to the cameras. And I hadn't hidden them so well on purpose, so that you would discover them sooner or later. That was also part of the plan."

"But... but then the project should be over when we took out the cameras," Pete said.

"No, because there are other cameras. Quite a few, in fact."

"There isn't," Jupiter contradicted. "I've searched everything. There are no cameras down here."

"Yes, there are. They are so well hidden that you couldn't possibly find it."

"Where?" asked Jupiter promptly, who immediately felt his honour had been violated. As an experienced detective, how could he have missed those cameras?

Jonathan smiled knowingly. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that. It's a professional secret, so to speak. It's my invention which I will patent very soon and sell at a high price."

Jupiter frowned. "What do you mean? Did you invent white tiles that are transparent from one side and hide the cameras behind them?"

"Something like that. Don't bother, Jupiter, you won't find out, and I really can't tell you... I'm very particular about that."

Jupiter was dissatisfied with this answer, but did not dwell on it for the time being. There was too much else he had to digest first. What he had just found out about happenings in the past twenty-four hours was simply incredible. And yet everything suggested that Thorndike was telling them the truth. The whole story suddenly made sense.

"When Pete finally injured himself, I thought long and hard about whether I should cancel the experiment. I'm sorry, Pete, I should have done it immediately. My greed for gripping images and a good story got the better of me. It wasn't fair of me. I hope you forgive me."

"And when Jolene finally told us the truth?" Jupiter continued to ask. "Why didn't you stop everything there and then?"

"Because I suddenly realized that this surprising twist would also be excellent in my movie. I wanted to keep you waiting a little longer. Believe me, I was always watching you. You were never in any real danger."

"Well," Pete muttered, looking at his arm, which had finally stopped bleeding but was still throbbing. "I have nothing to say at the moment."

Jonathan nodded. “Anyway, I suggest we get you fixed up now and leave this uncomfortable place.” He gestured towards the lift.

Pete nodded grimly. “I’m absolutely for it.”

Half an hour later, Pete looked at his freshly bandaged arm. After taking the freight lift upstairs, they had found themselves in an old factory building where things had already been set up for the planned filming that Jonathan Thorndike had talked about. But they had not had time to look around, instead, they had gone straight to Thorndike’s car, which had been parked outside in the abandoned lot.

The daylight and the warming rays of the sun had made the last hours in their underground prison fade away like a bad dream. After just a few minutes, it seemed absolutely unreal to Pete that he had actually been in the cold storage rooms of an abandoned fish factory for hours.

In the car park, they had said goodbye to Jolene, Shawn and Leah and agreed to meet again at the latest for the movie première. After that, Thorndike had driven them to a doctor nearby, who immediately took care of Pete’s injury, which fortunately was not as bad as it had looked in the meantime. Now it was only the bright white bandage and the dull throbbing that confirmed to Pete that it had all really happened.

“I’m still all confused,” he muttered.

“Because of this little injury?” the doctor asked with a laugh, patting him on the shoulder. “Surely an athletic young man like you has seen worse.”

Pete waved it off. Of course he hadn’t meant the injury, but everything else. He hadn’t told the doctor anything about his experiences, but had given him some story about a skateboarding accident to avoid strenuous questions. Finally, Pete got up from the treatment table, thanked the doctor and left the clinic together with Thorndike and Jupiter.

“Well,” Thorndike said as they stood by the road. “What a day.”

“Indeed,” Pete agreed. “I’m really excited about this movie.”

“Not just you, Pete, not just you. I will get back to you as soon as I have reviewed the footage.”

“To be honest, I’d like to be there when you look at the videos,” Jupiter said quickly, because he was very interested in the perspectives from which it had all been filmed. Maybe that would tell him where and how the cameras had been hidden. The fact that he could not get to the bottom of all aspects of this mystery annoyed the First Investigator immensely.

“I’m sorry, but you signed that you cannot be involved in the realization of the movie material, and that includes the implementation and editing,” Thorndike replied with a laugh, got into his car and rolled down the window. “Well then, you two, thank you again. It was an unforgettable experience. It’s going to be a great movie, I’m sure.”

“Wait a minute, you’re going now?” wondered Jupiter.

“Sorry, but I have to,” Jonathan said. “I have a lot to do today. You know—the next movie is waiting. After all, my experiment with you was just a short interlude. I’ll call you when there are news, okay?”

“We don’t even have your number!” shouted Jupiter. For him, all this was happening too fast.

“Yes, it’s in the newspaper ad. It should still be lying around somewhere in your house. Just give me a call, maybe we’ll meet for a Coke or something! See you then!” Jonathan started his car.

“He’s in a hurry all of a sudden,” Pete whispered to Juve.

“Yes, so I noticed. It’s almost as if he wanted to avoid us asking him any more questions... But wait and see, I’ll find out how he did it with the cameras. Jupiter Jones doesn’t give up that easily.”

Jonathan Thorndike stretched his pale arm out of the window once more, waved and accelerated.

Jupiter looked at his arm and froze. When he waved, the sleeve of the T-shirt had slipped down. A conspicuous birthmark had appeared underneath. It was a brown spot that was roughly the shape of an axe!

Suddenly something came back to Jupe... A brown island in the white sea... A factory hall... A spotlight... A young man with light blond hair—Thorndike... An important message on a note hidden somewhere nearby—very close.

“Oh, my goodness!” whispered Jupiter.

“What’s wrong, Jupe?” asked Pete anxiously.

“Now I... Now I remember!”

“What did you remember?” Pete asked. “What?”

“About... hardly anything,” Jupiter replied, confused. “Nothing at all, actually. It’s... it’s just images... There was a hall... The fish factory! ... And a spotlight... And Thorndike. He has this birthmark that looks like an axe, did you see?”

“Uh... yes. So what?”

“I wrote something down...” Jupe continued. “A short note, that’s all the time there was... and I hid it.”

“You hid a note? When? Where?”

“I don’t know when... I just know...” Jupiter concentrated. He concentrated with all his might. He couldn’t lose this memory again, as it had happened to him twice before. He had to keep the images in his mind!

The hall... The spotlight... The note... Where was the note?

“I know it!” he cried almost hysterically. “I know it!”

He bent down and took off his right shoe.

“But Jupe, what are you doing?”

Jupiter didn’t pay any attention to Pete. He had hidden a note, and he had just remembered where! He picked up his shoe and bent it. It was ancient and was almost falling apart. There was a crack that went right through the heel of the sole. And in that crack was a piece of paper. Excitedly, he pulled it out and unfolded it.

There were only five words on the note in his handwriting:

Don’t believe what Thorndike says!

17. Back to the Beginning

“Pete! We have to go back! Now!” Jupiter held the note under the Second Investigator’s nose.

“But... but what does that mean?” Pete asked.

“That means Jonathan Thorndike has been giving us a load of rubbish! And I knew he would, that’s why I hid this note.”

“When did you hide this note?”

“Sometime in the past... I can’t remember.”

“That means now you can remember?”

“No, I only remember the note... and the factory floor... and a spotlight. I don’t know how it’s all connected,” Jupe exclaimed. “Pete, all I know is that Thorndike lied to us! I hid that note in my shoe so I could find it later—like now! The broken sole was probably the safest place I could think of on the spur of the moment, because Thorndike must have searched all our pockets. After all, he took all our papers and so on!”

“Right! My wallet! My keys! They’re still missing! I’d forgotten all about that!” Pete burst out. “And you think Thorndike has them?”

“Yes, he did, and he has a whole lot more—namely the truth behind this whole story!” Jupe said excitedly. “Come on, Pete, we have to get back to the fish factory now!”

The Second Investigator had not yet understood what was going on, but it was enough for him that Jupiter had the perspective. He was already on the street and stopped the next taxi.

Fortunately, the two investigators could remember exactly where the fish factory was. So it was no problem for them to show the taxi driver the way.

Ten minutes later, they were standing on the road in front of the abandoned factory premises. The driver quoted the price.

“Oh, darn!” gasped Pete. “Our wallets!”

“Oh!” Jupiter had also not thought for a second that they had no money with them.

“Are you kidding me?” the taxi driver growled. “You don’t have any money? If you can’t pay—”

“Wait!” cried Jupiter. “There... there’s Bob!”

“Bob?” the driver repeated. “Who’s Bob? Listen, boys, if you don’t immediately—”

“Bob! Bob!” shouted Pete, jumping out of the taxi and running towards the yellow Beetle that was just coming from the other direction and slowing down. “Bob!”

The Beetle stopped and Bob got out. “Pete! Pete, thank goodness! What happened? What... what’s going on anyway? Where have you been?”

“Why are you here?” replied Pete, equally excited.

“It’s a long story. So, I—hey, what happened to your arm?”

“Later. Do you have any money? We have to pay the taxi.”

“I... what? Money? Yes, I have.”

Pete hurriedly paid for the taxi and returned to Bob with Jupiter. Only now did he notice that there were still two people in Bob’s car. A tall man with a bald head had squeezed into the back seat and could barely find room next to the folded wheelchair of...

“Jelena!” Pete cried. “Now, I really do not know what is going on at all!”

“Neither do I,” Jupiter interjected. “But that’s completely secondary at the moment. There’s Thorndike’s car up ahead. So he’s still here! Come on, fellas, we have to catch him before he takes off.”

“Thorndike?” asked Bob. “Jonathan Thorndike? That’s who we’re here for as well... and you, of course.”

“Well, what a coincidence. Come on, hurry up!” Jupe urged.

The man, whom Bob quickly introduced as William Boyd, got out of the car. Then they unfolded the wheelchair and all five hurried towards the warehouse.

“Jupiter, Pete, I’m William Boyd! Don’t you remember me?” asked Mr Boyd on the way.

Pete rolled his eyes. “We know each other? I’m not surprised. I’ve forgotten so many things.”

When Jupiter, Pete, Bob and Jelena stormed through the wide-open gate of the deserted hall, they saw Jonathan Thorndike standing on a ladder and meddling around on a steel scaffolding that hung from the ceiling and to which several large spotlights were attached. Leah was standing next to the ladder. Jolene and Shawn was not there.

Again, flashes of memory came through Jupiter. There was something about those spotlights... But before he could think about it, Leah had just noticed the unexpected visitors, and let out a sharp scream.

Thorndike looked down and climbed off the ladder at lightning speed. For a long moment, his friendly façade crumbled, but then he had himself under control again. “What... hey, there you are again. Did you forget something?”

“Indeed,” Pete growled. “Our wallets.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. You had given them to me for safekeeping.”

“For safekeeping, I see,” Jupiter repeated, leaving no doubt that he did not believe a word he said. “I think you still owe us an explanation, Mr Thorndike.”

“More explanations?” Thorndike laughed. “I thought you had enough to deal with from just now.”

“You can tell your story about the movie to anyone else, but I don’t believe a word of it.”

“Oh? And why not?” Thorndike asked in surprise.

Jupiter stepped towards Thorndike and held the note right in front of his eyes. “This is why.”

“Don’t believe what Thorndike says.” he read. “What is this, Jupiter?”

“This is a message from the past—from me to me,” Jupiter said. “And frankly, I’m inclined to believe myself more than you.”

“And he’s absolutely right about that,” suddenly said a voice from behind.

William Boyd, who had been hiding, now stepped into the hall with quiet steps. Jupiter could see Thorndike grow a little paler.

“William! What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Jonathan.”

“I... well you can see that. I’m still preparing a few little things for the start of shooting the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, so!” Boyd remarked. “Of course, you are preparing something... and during these preparations, Jupiter and Pete surprised you, which caused you to lock them up, am I right?”

“Mr Boyd,” Jupiter interjected. “I know we have met before. Only, unfortunately, I don’t remember it at all. Jonathan Thorndike has given us a drug that has erased the last twenty-four hours of our memory. I would be very grateful if you could give us your version of the story.”

Mr Boyd nodded. "I'm a movie producer, and I am Jonathan's boss for the next production—part of which will be shot here in this hall. But Jonathan and I had differences from the start. He wanted to make a completely different movie from what was intended. He wanted to change the script, have more money, and last but not least, replace the leading actress Carrie Porter in the role of Catherine.

"But that was absolutely impossible. I think Miss Porter is an outstanding actress. Besides, we already have a contract with her. On this point, Jonathan and I got into quite a bit of an argument. Eventually, I even suspected that Jonathan was planning to sabotage the production to get his way. That was when I called you—The Three Investigators."

"Oh, really?" Jupiter still had to get used to the fact that everyone else knew better about the past twenty-four hours than he did.

"Yesterday was the day," Mr Boyd continued. "I couldn't shake the feeling that Jonathan was up to something. So I hired you to tail him. After all, he didn't know you, so I thought it was safe... but apparently it wasn't, because you suddenly disappeared. I was very worried because I couldn't reach you at your headquarters or by mobile phone."

"So you called our headquarters seven times and didn't leave a message on the answering machine?" said Bob.

"Yes, that was probably me. I just wanted to check if Jupiter and Pete were back, but they remained missing. Finally, I went to the fish factory to see if I could find Jonathan here. On the way there, I passed the new factory and saw you, Bob. I'd seen your picture in the papers."

"And how did you find the fish factory?" asked Pete.

Now Bob and Jelena took turns telling their version of the story. "But I still don't really know what it's about," Bob finished.

"Sabotage, I suppose," said Mr Boyd. "You two must have somehow found out yesterday during your shadowing that Jonathan was planning something forbidden here on the factory floor—probably last night. So you drove here and watched him—"

"—And then got caught by him," Jupiter finished the sentence, turning to Jonathan Thorndike. "We saw or heard something that we should never have, didn't we? You caught us and you realized there was only one way you could get your head out of the noose. You had to somehow make us forget everything we had experienced. So you instilled this drug into us, but you couldn't be sure that we wouldn't actually remember anything. So you locked us up, installed the cameras and watched how we behaved after waking up—whether we remembered or not."

Jonathan Thorndike looked at Jupiter expressionlessly for a very long time without saying a word.

"But what?" asked Pete. "What were we watching, Jupe? What was it that we forgot?"

They looked at each other helplessly.

A mild smile played around Thorndike's mouth. "That's really a great story, and I'm sure it makes a good script, doesn't it, William? But it's nothing like that. I've told you two what really happened. Your speculations are intriguing, but since none of you can remember, they will probably remain as speculations."

Pete noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. Something was shaking under the hall ceiling. He looked up and saw one of the huge spotlights hanging directly above Leah's head detach itself from the scaffolding with an ugly creak—and fell!

18. A Diabolical Plan Revealed

The Second Investigator yelled a warning, jumped forward and pushed Leah aside at the last second. With a loud crash, the spotlight hit the concrete floor and thousands of glass fragments splashed through the air like drops of water.

For seconds, everyone was so startled that no one said a word. And in that silence, memories rose like huge bubbles in the First Investigator's head. The spotlight! He remembered!

"That... that..." he stammered, trying to put the memory into words before it disappeared again. "This has happened before!"

Pete interrupted him. "Yes! Last night! Right here! And we saw it!"

"You remember?" asked Jupiter, puzzled.

"Yes! We... we were back there, behind the concrete pillar, watching Mr Thorndike and Leah tampering with the spotlights. One crashed down, probably accidentally, and Thorndike said..."

"He said: 'If this thing lands on Carrie Porter's head, we'll be rid of her for good!'" Jupiter stared at Jonathan Thorndike. "You were planning to kill the leading lady of your movie!"

"So your girlfriend can get the part!" shouted Bob. "Of course! Your friend is Kimberly Lloyd! I overheard her learning the lines for the part of Catherine!"

Everyone looked stunned at Jonathan Thorndike. Mr Boyd was finally the first to say something. "Is that really true, Jonathan?"

Thorndike did not answer.

But then Leah spoke up. "It's true," she said contritely.

"Leah!" cried Thorndike.

"It's no use, Jonathan. The five of them have already figured out almost everything anyway." Leah turned to The Three Investigators, Jelena and Mr Boyd. "We didn't want to kill Carrie Porter, of course, just incapacitate her so Kimberly could get the part. You know how tight the shooting schedule is. If the leading actress is out of action for a long time, the role would certainly have to be recast... with Kimberly.

"So we met here in the hall at night and sabotaged the spotlight brackets so that at the right moment... Well, anyway, a spotlight accidentally crashed yesterday, and you two were watching. We caught you and found out that you had heard everything. So we had to do something, otherwise we would have lost our job."

"You?" asked Jupiter. "That means you're not a drama student?"

Leah shook her head. "I'm Jonathan's assistant director and Kimberly's friend. Last night was a nightmare! We had you locked in the basement but didn't know what to do. Then Jonathan came up with an ingenious plan of the memory potion. He had heard about this substance from a friend in the TV industry. Some of them got into trouble with it some time ago."

Jupiter grinned wryly. "Yes. We know about it. As a matter of fact, we were the ones who exposed those TV people back then... What a small world..."

“Anyway, Jonathan was still in contact with those people and was able to get the potion. Then we forced you to take it.”

“Shortly before, I must have found a way to write that note unnoticed and hide it in the sole of my shoe,” Jupiter murmured thoughtfully. “But what was it about Jolene and Shawn? They did really come from drama school, didn’t they?”

Leah nodded. “Jonathan wanted to play it safe, so he went to the drama school first thing this morning and hired the two of them and told them the story about the experimental movie. In reality, he only needed two people to talk to you, because that was the only way he could find out whether you could remember or not. With the help of the cameras and the built-in microphones, he observed and eavesdropped on you.”

“Why didn’t he just lock us in the same cell and save himself the trouble with the actors?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“Because he was afraid that you might jog each other’s memories. He really wanted to keep you two apart, and for as long as possible, until he could be sure that you had really forgotten everything. But that didn’t work, because Pete was able to open the door quite quickly.”

“And then you came into play,” Jupiter guessed.

“Right. When you destroyed the two cameras, Jonathan needed a way to eavesdrop on you further... So he sent me down.”

“Jolene and I heard a noise!” Pete remembered. “When we were running down the corridor, there was a noise. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Leah nodded. “Just in time, I was able to get into the cell from which you then freed me. From then on I was always up to date and could also try to stop you from trying to escape.”

“So you set the lift in motion and caused my fall!” cried Pete indignantly.

Leah nodded guiltily. “Yes. I couldn’t let you leave! But then Jolene dropped the bombshell and told you about the movie. Jonathan overheard everything from the lift cabin and saw that he couldn’t keep playing the game. He had earlier created the two contracts and forged your signatures from your IDs. He then came down to us with that and tried to keep up the lie about the movie.”

“So there were no more hidden cameras then,” Jupiter concluded. “Didn’t I know it! That struck me as funny right away!”

“Well,” Pete said with a grin. “What Jupiter Jones can’t explain can’t exist. It’s as simple as that.”

“So now that we have clarified the course of events,” Mr Boyd spoke up again, “I think it is time to do my duty—Jonathan and Leah—you’re both fired. And now I’m calling the police.”

While Mr Boyd retreated a few steps to make a phone call, Jupiter turned to the director: “I have to say, Mr Thorndike, I respect you! To develop such a good plan in such a short time and to remain flexible all the time so that the lie doesn’t collapse, that takes a lot of gumption. You almost fooled us.”

“But only almost,” Bob added smugly.

“There’s one more thing,” Pete said grimly, holding out his hand. “Our things!”

Dejectedly, Thorndike gave the two of them back their possessions. Pete opened his wallet, checked to make sure nothing was missing, and finally pulled out a business card, which he triumphantly thrust into Thorndike’s hand. “In case you ever need investigation services after you’re out of prison.” The card said:



Two days later, Jupiter, Pete, Bob, William Boyd and Jelena sat in the sunset on the verandah of the Joneses' house and ate Aunt Mathilda's cherry pie, which she had baked out of joy and relief at the safe return of her nephew. Together they talked again about all the details of their recent adventure.

"Mr Boyd," Jupe asked. "There's something that I still could not remember. How did you know us?"

"Well, to be honest, I'm a big fan of yours," Mr Boyd said. "I've been following your detective career in the press for years and have always wanted to get in touch with you."

"Wow!" Pete exclaimed. "How about that!"

Just then, Aunt Mathilda brought out another plate of cherry pie and Jupe was the first to reach for it, disregarding the presence of visitors.

"There's one other thing I don't quite understand," Bob said smacking his lips. "Why didn't you use my car to go to the fish factory? In the afternoon, you were parked in front of Thorndike's apartment, but you didn't use it for the drive to the fish factory. Why?"

"Well," Jupiter sighed. "Although I can remember the incident with the spotlight again—everything else is still hidden in the fog of amnesia, and probably will remain so. I'm sure we had a reason not to take the Beetle. Perhaps we were afraid Thorndike would recognize it, but for sure we'll never know."

Pete frowned. "It's quite a disturbing feeling still not being able to remember, I can tell you. Anything could have happened in those twenty-four hours! We'll never know!"

"A few unanswered questions will do you good," Jelena thought, earning a nasty look from the First Investigator.

"It will be quite difficult to write a report on this case if you can't tell me what happened," Bob said.

"Are you saying that there are reports on all your cases?" asked Mr Boyd with interest.

"Of course," Bob replied, not without pride. After all, he had written these reports. "Everything is accurately recorded. Why do you ask?"

"Well, as I said, I've been following your career for quite some time... and not entirely without ulterior motives."

Jupiter's ears perked up. "What do you mean?"

"I think you have already experienced a lot of exciting adventures, and if there are precise records of them, that is of course very practical for me... because I've been thinking for some time whether it would be worth making a movie about you three."

Pete choked and spluttered some cake crumbs out. "A movie?"

"Yes. A feature movie—for the cinema, or maybe even a TV series. Of course, I need your consent for that. What do you think?"

The Three Investigators looked at each other speechlessly.

Finally, Jupiter replied with a sly grin: “I think if you cast me with Brad Pitt or Keanu Reeves, you have my approval, Mr Boyd.”

Bob, Pete, Jelena and William Boyd burst out laughing.